

The background of the book cover is a red-toned illustration. It depicts a large crowd of people marching down a wide city street. In the background, a tall, ornate building, possibly a cathedral or a government building, stands prominently. The crowd is dense, and the overall scene suggests a significant public demonstration or a historical event. The illustration is rendered in a style that is both detailed and somewhat graphic, with strong lines and a limited color palette of reds and browns.

# **The British Labour Movement**

**A. L. MORTON  
and  
GEORGE TATE**

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# THE BRITISH LABOUR MOVEMENT

1770-1920

*A HISTORY*

by  
A. L. MORTON  
and  
GEORGE TATE

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# CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
	FOREWORD . . . . .	7
I.	THE BIRTH OF A CLASS . . . . .	9
	1. The People Take the Field . . . . .	9
	2. The English Jacobins . . . . .	20
	3. The Combination Acts . . . . .	31
	4. The Age of Peterloo . . . . .	38
II.	CHARTISM . . . . .	49
	1. The Reform Bill . . . . .	49
	2. Unions and Bastilles . . . . .	66
	3. The Charter Launched . . . . .	76
	4. Revival and Decline of Chartism . . . . .	88
III.	SEEKING NEW BEARINGS . . . . .	100
	1. The Chartist Aftermath and the New Model . . . . .	100
	2. From the Second Reform Act to the Great Depression . . . . .	112
IV.	THE EPOCH OF IMPERIALISM . . . . .	129
	1. The Transition to Imperialism . . . . .	129
	2. Social Consequences of Imperialism . . . . .	140
V.	THE REVIVAL OF SOCIALISM . . . . .	155
	1. From Radicalism to Socialism . . . . .	155
	2. The Social-Democratic Federation . . . . .	163
	3. Riding the Storm . . . . .	173
VI.	THE WORKING CLASS ON THE MARCH ONCE MORE . . . . .	185
	1. The New Unionism . . . . .	185
	2. Political Awakening . . . . .	197
VII.	THE ORIGINS AND EARLY YEARS OF THE LABOUR PARTY . . . . .	206
	1. The Employers Counter-Attack . . . . .	206
	2. The Labour Representation Committee . . . . .	213

# THE BRITISH LABOUR MOVEMENT

CHAP.		PAGE
VIII.	SOCIALISM AND THE GREAT UNREST . . . . .	225
	1. The Fight for a Socialist Policy . . . . .	225
	2. Syndicalism and Socialist Revival . . . . .	233
	3. The Industrial Struggle . . . . .	245
IX.	THE IMPERIALIST WAR . . . . .	254
	1. The Nature of the War . . . . .	254
	2. British Labour and the War . . . . .	255
	3. Mass Movement and Repression . . . . .	259
	4. The Russian Revolution . . . . .	271
X.	THE POST-WAR CRISIS . . . . .	277
	1. Britain after the War . . . . .	277
	2. Industrial Struggles . . . . .	279
	3. "Hands Off Russia": the Councils of Action . . . . .	285
	4. The Problem of Leadership . . . . .	289
	A NOTE ON SOURCES AND FURTHER READING . . . . .	300
	INDEX . . . . .	307

## FOREWORD

IT is but fitting that the Foreword to this book should say something about George Tate, since he not only wrote the greater part of it, but did more, perhaps, than anyone else to bring it into existence. I remember very clearly the part he took in the discussions held in the summer of 1953 among a number of Marxist historians and others interested, out of which the plan for this history of the British Labour Movement emerged. It is a great grief to all of us who worked with him on this project that his sudden death has robbed him of the pleasure of seeing its publication. Nevertheless, when he died the work was done, and I think that this volume is the kind of memorial he would most have wished.

George Tate was born on August 25th, 1914, and went to Brasenose College, Oxford, with a Junior Hulme Scholarship from Dame Alleyn's School, Newcastle. At Oxford he took an Honours degree in history, and there, in 1936, he joined the Communist Party. By all who have known him, he will be remembered as an example of the Communist intellectual in the best sense of that sometimes misused term.

After a couple of years on *The Newcastle Journal*, he came to London early in 1939, to become a member of the staff of *The Daily Worker*. On the outbreak of war he joined the Army, but was invalided out in January, 1941, after a long illness. He never fully recovered from the effects of this, but began after a few years to suffer great and increasing pain and disability. This he faced with a courage, patience and cheerfulness that seemed never-failing, and he never allowed it to stand in the way of whatever he felt to be important work for the movement.

In 1941, too, he married, and I think the happiness of his family circle gave him immense help in overcoming the handicap of his ill-health. The picture of George at home with his wife and daughters is one that all his friends must look back to with real pleasure.

After leaving the Army, he taught for a while at Barnard Castle School, and in 1943 rejoined *The Daily Worker*. From 1948 he was a sub-editor at the Press Association.

Apart from the present volume and numerous articles (some published under the name of George Armstrong), he was responsible for two books, *London's Struggle for Socialism* (1948) and *The London Trades Council, a History* (1950). The latter seems to me to be a small masterpiece—a thoroughly adequate treatment of a really worth-while subject. It was perhaps characteristic of George that each of these books appeared as nearly anonymously as could well be! It is only those who have worked with him who were in a position to discover behind George's modesty and self-effacement a competence, a wealth of knowledge that was continually being increased, and a readiness to put it at the disposal of his comrades, which never failed to meet every demand made upon them. His death at the age of forty-one, with much of the work of which he was capable still to come (he had just begun to gather materials for a second volume of this history), has been a loss deeply felt by all who knew him.

The present volume is the outcome of co-operative work, beginning with the discussions I have already mentioned and continued at all stages by written and verbal criticisms and suggestions from a very large number of people. Finally, however, writing must be done by someone, and I am responsible for the present form of the first three chapters and George Tate for the remainder. Our object was to set out briefly and simply what we felt to be the main features of the history of the British Labour Movement up to the conclusion of the First World War. If a sufficient number of readers find here a useful and stimulating introduction, our intentions will have been completely realised.

A. L. MORTON.



## CHAPTER I

### THE BIRTH OF A CLASS

#### 1. *The People Take the Field*

THE story of the British working-class movement properly begins in the second half of the eighteenth century. Earlier, of course, there had been popular movements of various kinds, in which wage-earners had taken part, but it is not till after about 1760 that these wage-eagers had so grown in numbers and cohesion as to make it possible to think of them as a working class in the modern sense of that term. Yet if the history of the working class belongs to modern times, it is of a length, complexity and richness quite unparalleled in any other country. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries we passed through stages which elsewhere were not reached till long after, and, just as British capitalism set the pattern which other lands were to follow later with modifications, the experiences of the British working class which was its necessary outcome were an example which has been studied by socialists in every part of the world.

The eighteenth century as a whole was an age of steadily advancing capitalism. In the previous century the struggles of the English Revolution had won for the dominant section of the bourgeoisie the kind of state, the government and political system which they needed to grow rich. The final phase of that Revolution, in 1688, after the defeat of the popular forces which defended the interests of the small producers, had left the great Whig landed families, in alliance with leading merchants and financiers of London and the other big towns, in an unchallengeably strong position. For almost a hundred years politics were kept as the close preserve of this privileged group, and political struggle became largely a private battle for pickings and plunder.

Meanwhile, trade increased rapidly, particularly the immensely profitable trade and looting of the colonial areas of the Eastern and Western Hemispheres, and above all of India. Agriculture, more and more capitalist as enclosure and other

forces divided the peasantry into substantial farmers and landless wage-earners, went through a series of technical advances which increased both productivity and profits while making inevitable, in the long run, the destruction of the remaining peasantry and the vast numbers of country people who still retained common rights or little patches of land. A series of wars enriched financiers, merchants and the growing class of Army contractors and manufacturers of military and naval equipment.

The steady accumulation of capital tended to flow especially into the industries thus stimulated: iron, coal, shipbuilding, and into new industries, like cotton and potteries. The provisioning and supply of the growing towns, above all of London, which with well over a half a million inhabitants by the mid-century had about a tenth of the country's population, had themselves become major industries affording a steadily rising market for farm produce and consumer goods and demanding an elaborate transport system by land and sea.

It was in the new industries, with a high concentration of capital, and in transport, that we can find the clearest beginnings of the working class. The colliers and keelmen of the north-east, the ironworkers of the Midlands, the dockers, seamen and coal-heavers of London and Bristol had no doubt existed for a long time, but before about the mid-century not in such numbers as to make them in any sense a decisive force.

Even now we must be careful not to over-simplify the picture. The working class was still only *beginning* to emerge and only in some industries and in some areas. A great part of production was still carried on by workshop industry in which the actual producer enjoyed a greater or less degree of independence. This was the case with woollen textiles, for example, still the greatest single industry after agriculture. Many of the people employed in this workshop production were in effect wage-earners from a very early date, and as the industrial revolution proceeded this became more and more their normal condition. The hand-weavers in wool and cotton, the hosiers of Leicester, Sheffield cutlers and nail-makers from the Black Country were among the many involved in this kind of change, which meant a movement from greater to less independence and a steady and, in many cases, catastrophic lowering of their standards of life. By the time of Peterloo (1819), for example,

the vast number of hand-weavers in the towns of Lancashire and the West Riding were in every sense wage workers, and were in fact the leading force in the agitations of those years. Their position made effective trade union organisation very difficult, but perhaps for this very reason we shall find them displaying the most intense and militant political radicalism.

There were also hundreds of thousands of skilled artisans, working on their own or at the most with one or two apprentices or journeymen. It was not easy for these skilled craftsmen, literate, craft-proud, often Dissenters, to feel a community of interest with the miners, dockers, or, a little later, factory operatives. Yet it is the fusion and transformation of all these elements into a single class which is the essence of the first part of our story.

About 1760 a great change begins to come over the English scene. The century-long equilibrium of class forces ends: politics become fluid, new conflicts develop, new methods, new classes take the field. The dominance of the great Whig Party, representing what Marx calls the "permanent alliance between the bourgeoisie and the greater part of the big landlords" (*Marx and Engels on Britain*, p. 346), was challenged—not indeed from the left but from the right, by George III and his "tail" who began to take a hand in the organised corruption which then constituted parliamentary politics. Yet this intervention was only possible because the advance of new class forces had disintegrated the Whigs from within, because there was no longer a solid and unchallenged ruling phalanx. And its result was to split the Whigs still further and to bring on the scene the middle classes and artisans for the first time since the Revolution. A genuine left began to appear. Further, in their struggle against the Crown the Whigs were forced, however insincerely, to use again after a hundred years the half-forgotten language of the Good Old Cause, language that called up an unexpected and unwelcome response. The artisans, and presently the wage-earners, began to question the age-old assumption that "politics" were something which concerned only the privileged few.

This is not to suggest, of course, that the new ferment from below was the result only or mainly of the crisis above. Throughout the eighteenth century the ferment always existed below the surface, expressing itself often in riot or arson, or in the fervours

of Methodism. The extraordinary success of Methodism in the second half of the century is an indication of a profound popular dissatisfaction, still seeking its true mode of expression. The crisis at the top, coming just at the moment when the working class was beginning to materialise, gave that dissatisfaction a golden opportunity to find the outlets it needed. Therefore it is not by accident that we can find at this time a striking advance of trade union and political movements among the "lower orders".

And after about 1760 a new sharpness was given to the struggle. Up to this time prices had been stable, and there may even have been some increase in real wages, though certainly far smaller than the increase in capitalist or landlord's profits and rents. After 1760 food prices began to rise and real wages to fall, especially for the unskilled and semi-skilled, almost the whole of whose wages were necessarily spent on food. The alternations of war and peace between 1756 and 1783 made employment increasingly irregular, especially for the dockers, carters, etc., now concentrated in increasing numbers in London and the great ports. It was among the riverside workers of London that John Wilkes found his firmest supporters.

In the career of Wilkes, the son of a rich London merchant who became the leader of a great popular agitation, many of the main features of the period can be most clearly seen. He came into politics as a follower of one of the leading parliamentary groups—that of Chatham and Lord Temple. In his paper *The North Briton* Wilkes made an impudent attack on George III and his government, and this partisan struggle soon developed into one for elementary civil liberties. He then found that his noble patrons were interested neither in himself nor in the principles he had raised. He was outlawed, forced into exile, and, on his return, suffered a term of imprisonment. In the course of events Wilkes came more and more to find his true support in the London masses, and, learning from his followers at every stage, soon became the leader of a genuine and broadly-based movement for democratic reform. A contemporary account remarked:

"It has been said that in the neighbourhood of St. James's Mr. Wilkes's enemies are forty-five to fifteen; in the City his advocates are forty-five to fifteen; and in Wapping his staunch supporters are forty-five to none at all."



The "Massacre of St. George's Fields", where a huge crowd of his supporters, demonstrating to demand his release from prison, was attacked on May 10th, 1768, by troops who killed six people and wounded many more, set London ablaze. A whole series of strikes, partly political, partly economic, followed. Seamen, portworkers and coal-heavers were most prominent in them, but weavers, tailors, joiners and a number of other trades were also involved. From London the movement spread over the Home Counties and as far north as Lancashire and Yorkshire: in the election of 1774 Wilkes took the field at the head of an embryo Radical Party with a programme that included shorter parliaments, the exclusion of placemen and pensioners, more equal and extensive franchise and the defence of popular rights in England, Ireland and America. On this programme some dozen members were returned, a remarkable feat considering how few constituencies had anything like a broad electorate.

More important in the long run was the development in the course of this agitation of many of the weapons and methods of struggle that have remained of the highest value. The popular press and the mass pamphlet, which had hardly been known since the days of the Levellers, were used on a wide scale. Another Leveller weapon that was revived was the mass petition. Carefully organised public meetings were held both in London and in provincial towns to which touring speakers were sent, rather as the Chartists later sent out their missionaries. The practice of demanding from parliamentary candidates clear promises to support specific policies began to assert the democratic principle that Members of Parliament were popular representatives and not mere irresponsible individuals. Finally, this period saw the establishment of an organisation, the Society of the Bill of Rights, which, though short-lived and middle class in composition, was the first of a long series from which finally emerged political parties of the working class.

Even though Wilkes ceased to be an active political force after the Gordon Riots<sup>1</sup> (1780) broke his connection with the London masses who had been his most enthusiastic followers,

<sup>1</sup> The Gordon Riots began in London as a protest against a proposal to remove some of the legal disabilities of the Catholics. Large scale arson and looting followed, and Wilkes, as a leading City Alderman, took an active part in their suppression.

the reform agitation continued. For a few years even leading politicians of the ruling class found it convenient to pose as reformers. Apart from these, there were a number of more genuine Radicals, some of whom link up with the English Jacobins of the next period. Among them were Horne Tooke, formerly Wilkes's most able lieutenant, and Dr. John Jebb. A third, who remained active till his death in 1832, was Major Cartwright. In 1776 he wrote his pamphlet *Take Your Choice* in which virtually the whole programme which inspired every popular movement for the next seventy-five years was first clearly outlined. Cartwright here demanded annual parliaments, manhood suffrage, vote by ballot, equal representation and the payment of members. These three were members of the Society for Promoting Constitutional Information: a rather different, though sometimes overlapping group, was that of the Dissenting Radicals, among whom Price, a nonconformist minister, and the scientist Priestley were prominent. They formed the London Revolution Society, a body very much more respectable than its name might suggest.

All these were middle-class bodies with middle-class and in some cases even aristocratic leaders. This middle-class radicalism was essentially a product of the Industrial Revolution which began to develop rapidly towards the close of the eighteenth century. The history of this revolution is so well known that nothing is needed here but the briefest summary. Its main features were the growth of large-scale industry, driving out, over a period of generations, the small production which was previously dominant, and the transformation of the small, more or less independent producers into wage-earners entirely divorced from the means of production. A vast, new world market was created, calling for an ever increasing flow of goods. Consequently, in one industry after another, new methods of production and new forms of organisation were developed.

About 1750 a decisive step was taken by the use of coke for smelting iron. Then, in the last quarter of the century, new methods of spinning and weaving revolutionised the cotton, and somewhat later, the wool industry. The use of steam power multiplied the possibilities of mass production and created the engineering industry. The construction of roads and canals, and, later, the railways and steamship, first unified the home

market and then opened the whole world for British trade. Factory production concentrated hundreds and even thousands of workers into a single enterprise.

All this was accompanied by a rapid increase in population. When the first census was taken in 1801 this had already grown substantially to reach ten and a half million: fifty years later it was just short of twenty-one million. Not only was there this absolute increase, but also a complete change in distribution. In the middle of the eighteenth century about half the people lived in the country districts, but by 1851 less than a quarter. New towns grew up, and towns which had been quite small increased by leaps and bounds. A few figures will illustrate this:

	1801	1851
Manchester	35,000	353,000
Leeds	53,000	152,000
Sheffield	46,000	111,000
Birmingham	23,000	181,000

One of the outstanding features of most of these towns was their overwhelmingly working-class character: in the older towns the working, middle and upper classes lived side by side. Now there were large industrial towns composed almost entirely of workers, while in the biggest towns the workers were confined to slums of a hideously squalid character quite separate from the quarters where the more prosperous citizens lived.

The Industrial Revolution, indeed, was not merely a *technical* revolution, it was a *social* transformation which created new class relations. In the words of Marx:

"First manufacture developed . . . to a hitherto unknown extent, only to make room subsequently, for big industry, the steam-engine and gigantic factories. Entire classes of the population disappear, and new ones with new conditions of existence and new requirements take their place. A new, more colossal bourgeoisie arises. While the old bourgeoisie fights the French Revolution, the new one conquers the world market. It becomes so omnipotent that even before the Reform Bill puts direct political power into its hands it forces its opponents to pass laws almost exclusively in *its* interests and according to *its* needs." (*Marx and Engels on Britain*, p. 347.)

The middle-class radicalism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was the result of the rise of this *new bourgeoisie*—the industrialists and the shopkeepers and small traders who followed their lead. This new bourgeoisie was outside the Whig oligarchy which had monopolised state power since 1688. Now, at the close of the eighteenth century, progressively strengthened by every step of the Industrial Revolution, it pressed for a share in both power and spoils, and, as we have seen, put forward a broad democratic programme of parliamentary reform.

If early radicalism had been only a matter of this, its history would be simple enough, but there were other important excluded groups, notably the artisans and industrial workers, and the history of early radicalism is therefore a complex one, involving the constantly changing relations between all these unprivileged sections of the population, a series of shifting and antagonistic alliances. In this history a number of definite stages can be noted.

In the first, up to the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, the leadership and initiative comes from the middle classes, but in the course of their agitation they arouse and draw behind them large numbers of workers, especially in London.

After 1789, though at first only gradually, the middle classes retreat, alarmed at the course taken by events in France and the fierce reactions aroused by them among the lower orders in Britain. Radicalism in this period, that of the British Jacobins, becomes almost exclusively a lower-class agitation, and at the same time extends from London to many provincial centres—Norwich, Birmingham, Sheffield and the textile areas of Lancashire, Yorkshire and Scotland. As the war against revolutionary France proceeds, the whole of the propertied classes close their ranks against Jacobinism abroad and at home.

After the final defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo, and the temporary re-establishment of reaction in Europe, a third phase opens. Once more the middle classes, now much stronger, begin to press for a share in the control of the state. But at the same time the workers have also grown stronger and more experienced, and begin to see that their enemy is not only the old aristocracy but also the industrialists who exploit them directly. Consequently, in this period, up to the passing of the Reform Act of 1832, relations are far more complex and fluid,



and while the masses still, in the main, follow the middle class, they do so with increasing doubts and hesitations.

The fourth stage is reached after 1832, when the main objectives of the middle classes have been won and the betrayal of their working-class allies has become manifest. After 1832 we enter quickly the stage of Chartism, in which the workers stand out against *all* other classes, fighting as an independent force for political power as a means of transforming the whole structure of society. Middle-class radicalism persists in this period, but with new and more limited objectives of a kind less attractive to the masses.

It is essential at all times to see this middle-class radicalism in relation to the steady political and industrial awakening of the lower orders. It is to the latter that we must now turn.

We know much less than we would like about the beginnings of trade unionism in the eighteenth century. Union activity was illegal or barely legal. Few records, probably, were kept and none have survived; few references other than passing expressions of disapproval are to be found in contemporary literature.<sup>1</sup> Yet there is evidence enough to make it clear that trade union and industrial activity were considerable and increased steadily as the advance of capitalism divorced the workers from the means of production. Throughout this period the typical relationship becomes more and more that of wage earner and employer, though often it still existed in a primitive form, entangled with the relationships of small independent production.

Towards the end of the century we can find widespread evidence of union activity in those workshop or domestic industries which were developing along capitalist lines. We must remember that such industries were commonly still rural or semi-rural. Often they were centred in large, compact villages, not unlike many mining communities to-day, in which the bulk of the population worked at the same industry and often for a single capitalist, or a very small number of capitalists. In such conditions a high degree of cohesion and united action might be possible. This often led to strikes even where no permanent organisation existed. These strikes were often accompanied by considerable riots, by arson and machine-breaking—useful both as a means of putting pressure on employers and to prevent any possible blacklegging.

<sup>1</sup> There are many useful references in the records of assizes and quarter sessions.

Such forms of struggle can be found in many industries and areas: in the West of England clothing industry there are constant complaints by employers of combinations and strikes, and riots were common: in the Nottingham framework knitting industry where there were riots in, among other years, 1783, 1787 and 1791: in the Norwich worsted area, where there was a longstanding tradition of riot and a highly developed technique for dealing with blacklegs: among the miners of the north-east coast where we hear of strikes or riots in 1710, 1744, 1750, 1765, 1771 and 1794, in some of which stocks of coal were burnt or pithead machinery destroyed. London has already been referred to in connection with the Wilkesite agitations.

In all these cases the picture is one of primitive organisation but great energy and courage. Because there is no regular organisation with funds to provide strike pay, the methods of riot and sabotage were necessary to produce the greatest effect in a short time: a strike that could not be won quickly could not be won at all.

A somewhat more advanced organisation is described in an account of the Leicestershire woolcombers in 1751—an account which contains the germ of almost every employers' picture of a trade union from that day to this. The woolcombers, we are told, had

“for a number of years past erected themselves into a sort of corporation (though without a charter); their first pretence was to take care of their poor brethren that should fall sick, or be out of work; and this was done by meeting once or twice a week, and each of them contributing 2*d.* or 3*d.* towards the box to make a bank, and when they become a little formidable they gave laws to their masters, as also to themselves—viz. That no man should comb wool under 2*s.* per dozen; that no master should employ any comber who was not of their club; if he did they agreed one and all not to work for him; and if he had employed twenty they all of them turned out, and often times were not satisfied with that, but would abuse the honest man that would labour, and in a riotous manner beat him, break his comb-pots, and destroy his working tools; they further support one another in so much that they are become one society throughout the kingdom. And that they may keep up their price to encourage idleness rather than labour, if any one of their club is out of work, they give him a ticket and money to seek for work at the next town where a box club is, where he is also subsisted; by which means he can travel

the kingdom round, be caressed at each club, and not spend a farthing of his own or strike one stroke of work. This hath been imitated by the weavers also, though not carried through the kingdom but confined to the places where they work." (*A Short Essay upon Trade*, 1741. Quoted from S. and B. Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism*, pp. 36-7.)

These Leicester woolcombers seem to have been midway between the groups to whom we have been referring and the skilled town artisans with their trade clubs. These clubs have perhaps had more attention than they really deserve, somewhat at the expense of the looser, more militant bodies we have been describing from which the unions were to develop in the new factory industries created by the Industrial Revolution.

The craft clubs were usually quite small bodies, composed of the members of the craft in a single town or locality. Often they were friendly societies or social clubs. Sometimes they had few other functions, but at other times these formed a convenient legal screen when any concerted action to raise wages or improve conditions of work might lead to prosecution under the conspiracy laws even before the passing of the Combination Act in 1799. Some of these clubs were of long standing: the London Hatters may have dated from 1667, and in 1771 we find that they had established a federation of local trade clubs in more than a dozen provincial towns in addition to those of London and Southwark: the craft club is already beginning to grow into the craft union. Among other trades in which such organisations flourished were the tailors, millwrights, joiners and printers. Liverpool shipwrights and Sheffield cutlers were among the best organised groups, and in 1790 *The Sheffield Iris* printed a typical employers' complaint about the

"scissor-grinders and other workmen who have entered into unlawful combinations to raise the price of labour."

If the first described type of organisation can best deserve Engels' title of "schools of war", both types can justly be called "schools of politics". Throughout this period the need for political action was forcing itself upon the workers. The constant prosecutions for conspiracy, the repeated failure of efforts to secure the enforcement of the old law about wages and apprenticeship, now in fact becoming quite incompatible with advancing capitalism, the undisguised bias of law

and magistrates in favour of the employers, drove home the conclusion that the state was in the hands of their class enemies and made parliamentary reform no longer an abstract idea but a step in the direction of securing for the masses at least some share in the control of the state.

## 2. *The English Jacobins*

The American War of Independence (1775-83) strengthened this growing political ferment. The rottenness of the existing régime was fully exposed by its inability to deal with a revolutionary war. In addition, the colonists' claims of no taxation without representation and the right to resist an oppressive government could not but influence tens of thousands in England, Ireland and Scotland who felt that they too were oppressed and knew that they were unrepresented.

The trade clubs began to add political items to those they were already concerned with, and the clubs were nurseries for all the reform movements from the time of Wilkes to that of the Rotundists. Samuel Bamford, a Lancashire weaver whose autobiography *Passages in the Life of a Radical* is one of the most vivid accounts of early working-class movements, writing of the period about 1816, takes it for granted that the clubs discussed politics, and his picture is probably true, to a less extent perhaps, for the last two decades of the eighteenth century.

"Every man would have his half-pint of porter before him; many would be speaking at once, and the hum and confusion would be such as gave an idea of there being more talkers than thinkers—more speakers than listeners. Presently 'order' would be called, and comparative silence would ensue; a speaker, stranger or citizen, would be announced with much courtesy and compliment. 'Hear, hear hear' would follow, with clapping of hands and knocking of knuckles on the tables till the half-pints danced; then a speech, with compliments to some brother orator or popular statesman; next a resolution in favour of parliamentary reform, and a speech to second it; an amendment on some minor point would follow; a seconding of that; a breach of order by some individual of warm temperament; half a dozen would rise to set him right; a dozen to put them down; and the vociferation and gesticulation would become loud and confounding." (*Passages*, Vol. I, p. 23.)

Perhaps the confusion was more apparent than real: the point



is that the workers were learning to move in a new country and to express themselves in a strange language. The century of political indifference was giving way to an age of intense political activity in which the British working class was formed and made its first serious appearance.

The effect of the American Revolution was considerable: that of the French Revolution was decisive. Everyone was influenced by it, but the nature of the influence was widely different upon the different classes. For the ruling class and their hangers-on it came with a note of doom: threatening the end of their monopoly of power and the rewards that power conferred. Even if they survived, their period of *unchallenged* supremacy was over and survival could only be bought at the cost of constant battle and the most adroit manœuvre. For them, the Revolution was a call to end internal feuds and close the ranks. The government of Pitt and his successors was the product of this consolidation of the ruling class, a war government in the internal as well as the external sense.

The reaction of those sections of the bourgeoisie who were still outside the privileged circle was rather different. Many of them had supported earlier reform movements, many, at first, welcomed the Revolution in the belief that it would advance their interests. But as the Revolution took on an increasingly popular character, as the peasants began the forcible seizure of the land, as the Monarchy was overthrown, and the Jacobins, the party which represented the alliance of the working masses with the most advanced sections of the lower middle class, came into power, their attitude changed and the great majority moved into the camp of Pitt. Their utmost aim now was to secure for themselves a place within the political circle. When Pitt was able, in 1793, to provoke a war with the young Republic, he had the support of almost all the men of substance.

The Revolution was supported whole-heartedly only by the workers and independent artisans, who for the first time now began to emerge as a leading force, with their own political organisation. Three famous books perhaps illustrate most neatly these varying reactions. In 1790 Edmund Burke, who, like Pitt, had at one time posed as a moderate reformer, published his *Reflections on the French Revolution*. In it he attacked not only the Revolution but the whole conception of democracy. The book created an immense sensation and provoked a number of

replies, among which the *Vindiciae Gallicae* of Sir James Mackintosh was perhaps the most praised in literary circles. Yet by 1796 Mackintosh had completely recanted his earlier radicalism, and, as Hazlitt said,

"became a convert not merely to the graces and gravity of Mr. Burke's style, but to the liberality of his views and the solidity of his opinions." (*Sir James Mackintosh in The Spirit of the Age.*)

Mackintosh was duly rewarded with an Indian judgeship.

Very different in its history and its effect was Tom Paine's *The Rights of Man*. Paine had taken a leading part in the American War of Independence and saw in the events in France a new stage in the battle for democracy. The first part of *The Rights of Man* was a defence of the French people and a triumphant refutation of Burke's thesis that the people had nothing to do with the laws except to obey them. The second part attacked with the most damaging particularity the corrupt, borough-mongering system prevailing in Britain. Paine defended Republicanism and the right of revolution, he ridiculed Monarchy and its supporters:

"It is easy to conceive that a band of interested men, such as placemen, pensioners, lords of the bedchamber, lords of the kitchen, lords of the necessary-house, and the Lord knows what besides, can find as many reasons for Monarchy as their salaries, paid at the expense of the country, amount to; but if I ask the farmer, the manufacturer, the merchant, the tradesman, and down through all the occupations of life to the common labourer, what service Monarchy is to him? he can give me no answer. If I ask him what Monarchy is, he believes it is something like a sinecure."

Here was a new voice, speaking with hatred and contempt of venerable abuses in a language and a tone to which the simplest could respond. *The Rights of Man* proved in detail that a democratic, peace-loving government which reduced the armed forces and abolished the graft and sinecures which swallowed up so much of the revenue, could abolish indirect taxation, and, by means of a graduated income-tax, have ample means to provide old-age pensions, universal education and many of the social services which had in fact to wait for over a century. This kind of political arithmetic was terrifying to the rich in just the degree to which it was understandable to the people. *The Rights of Man* showed for the first time that

political democracy was not an abstraction but the road to a decent life for the masses: although hastily banned, it became the universal text book for the working-class movement, selling some 200,000 copies in three years and even being translated into Welsh and Gaelic.

In 1792 the radical movement among the "lower classes" produced its first organisation—the London Corresponding Society. Other bodies, the Constitutional Society and the Society of the Friends of the People, existed already, but these were middle class in character with subscriptions which effectively excluded the workers. On January 25th, 1792, eight working men met at the Bell Tavern and decided to set up the London Corresponding Society with a subscription of one penny a week: the eight pennies were duly paid over and handed to Thomas Hardy, who was elected Secretary and Treasurer. Hardy was a Scottish shoemaker, settled in London for eighteen years, first drawn into active politics during the American war, educated upon the pamphlets of Jebb and Cartwright, no orator but already an organiser of outstanding ability. He proposed the grouping of the Corresponding Society into divisions of thirty, new divisions being formed as membership increased. This it did quite rapidly, and by the end of 1792 may have totalled 3,000.

Its main programme was manhood suffrage and equal representation, but in August a Public Address was issued which pointed out that an honest and genuinely representative Parliament could remove the grievous oppressions of the common man: cuts in pensions,<sup>1</sup> army and secret services would lighten the heavy taxes, laws would be simplified and common lands taken from the people by enclosures would be restored. This connection between reform and daily life is brought out even more clearly by a Sheffield worker, who, when asked about the objects of the Society, replied:

"To enlighten the people, to show the people the reason, the ground of all their complaints and sufferings; when a man works hard for thirteen or fourteen hours a day, the week through, and is not able to maintain his family; that is what I understand of it; to show the people the ground of this; why they were not able."  
(*State Trials*, XXIV, Col. 630, quoted from Brown, *French Revolution in English History*, pp. 62-3.)

<sup>1</sup> Pensions at this time were, of course, only paid to members of the ruling class.

Sheffield, indeed, was ahead of London. Its Constitutional Society, recruited from the small master and journeymen cutlers, was formed towards the end of 1791, and Hardy may have borrowed from it the scheme of organisation into divisions. In April, 1792 its secretary, Samuel Ashton, wrote to Hardy proposing an alliance and claiming already several thousand members. Sheffield was only one of the places where such societies existed, and soon they were linking up with the L.C.S. which came to be regarded as the central and leading body of a loose federation. It is notable that many of the strongholds of reform were places where trade union activity was of long standing. Thus the Norwich weavers quickly formed a network of branches of the Norwich Revolution Society, while in Nottingham and district the framework knitters allied with the more advanced middle-class reformers to establish a Constitutional Society. In 1796 a Tree of Liberty was forcibly planted in the Nottingham Market Place, while even as late as 1802 the anniversary of the fall of the Bastille was celebrated by chairing the Radical M.P. round the town to the strains of the *Marseillaise*. It is clear that the rapid organisation of the English Jacobins in 1792 would have been quite impossible if the working class had not already a rich experience stretching back over several decades.

The Government was thrown into panic by this new working-class radicalism. A whole series of repressive measures were put into operation. First of all came the pogrom. The "Church and King" mob which attacked the houses of the scientist Priestley and other Birmingham radicals on July 14th, 1791 was no spontaneous gathering of indignant workers as has often been suggested. It was a deliberate and carefully organised attempt by the ruling class to intimidate its opponents, and received the open approval of many leading figures, including George III who wrote:

"I cannot but feel the better pleased that Priestley is the sufferer for the doctrines he and his party have instilled." (Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 81.)

Similar riots were instigated in a number of other towns, with the effect that many middle-class reformers were frightened into political inactivity.

In 1792 the Government struck more specifically against the

working-class reformers. Pressure began to be put upon publicans to refuse the use of rooms for political meetings. Next, proceedings for seditious libel—based on some passages in *The Rights of Man*, such as one which said:

“The time is not very far distant when England will laugh at itself for sending to Holland, Hanover, etc., for men at a million a year who understand neither her laws, her language, nor her interests, and whose capacities would scarce have fitted them for the office of a parish constable.”

—were taken against Tom Paine. Paine escaped to France just in time to avoid arrest and in December was tried in his absence, found guilty and outlawed. His condemnation was followed by a general offensive against the printers, publishers and sellers of “seditious” literature. In this the Government had the help of an unofficial but certainly inspired body, the Association for Preserving Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers. Even as early as this the “free world” trick is tried out, and this by an Association one of whose main objects was to make sure that magistrates carried out their duty of denying every kind of liberty to the working class.

The next scene of the drama takes place in Scotland. Here the privileged circle of the ruling class was far narrower even than in England and the support for parliamentary reform was correspondingly more widespread. Just at the time of Paine’s trial the Scottish Jacobins held a convention in Edinburgh. The name Convention had a decidedly French ring, but the proceedings were in fact restrained: an address from the United Irishmen, congratulating Scotland on willing reform “with the unity and energy of an embodied nation” was read but not formally received. This moderation did not prevent the arrest and trial of Thomas Muir, the leading Scottish reformer. The main offences charged against him were recommending the works of Tom Paine and reading the “treasonable address” from the United Irishman.<sup>1</sup>

Lord Braxfield, before whom Muir and other Scottish reformers were tried, showed an open partisanship and a disregard of the customary legal decencies such as had not been seen in a British court since the days of Judge Jeffreys and the Bloody Assize—perhaps because this was the first time since

<sup>1</sup> See below, p. 30.

the defeat of the last great popular rising at Sedgemoor that the British ruling class felt its position seriously threatened. In these trials no acts of sedition were proved or even alleged. It was the case of the Crown that the mere act of trying to secure the reform of Parliament, by however legal and peaceful means, was in itself seditious. As Braxfield put it:

"A government in every country should be just like a corporation, and in this country it is made up of the landed interest who alone have the right to be represented." (*State Trials*, XXIII, 231, from Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 98.)

Muir was sentenced to fourteen years' transportation, but despite this the Scottish radicals held a second Convention, which included Joseph Gerrald and Maurice Margarot as delegates from the London Corresponding Society and three delegates from the United Irishmen. This Convention was held in November, 1793, but was quickly suppressed. Margarot, Gerrald, Skirving and others were arrested and they too were tried before Braxfield who once again acted as a supplementary counsel for the prosecution. The highlight of this trial, perhaps, was his comment, in reply to Gerrald's assertion that Jesus Christ was a reformer: "Muckle he made o' that: he was hangit." All these prisoners were sentenced to fourteen years transportation: so great were their hardships on the voyage that Skirving and Gerrald died soon after reaching Botany Bay. Muir was rescued by an American privateer and eventually reached France, where he too died in 1799.

These sentences and the suppression of the Convention created an intense indignation among the workers and many sections of the middle class in Scotland. The conclusion was widely drawn that if peaceful agitation for reform was illegal the only remaining course was armed insurrection. Groups began to drill secretly and collect weapons, but unfortunately they were infested with spies and government agents, who sometimes themselves provoked the actions which they were paid to denounce. A case of this kind was that of Robert Watt, who, on being arrested with some others on a charge of treason, was discovered to have been a government agent. His defence was that he was continuing to act as such, but the prosecution declared that he had ceased to be in their employment some time before his arrest and had in fact been converted to the views of

those on whom he was sent to spy. Whatever may have been the truth of the matter Watt was hanged in October, 1794: what is certain is that it is from about that time that we can date the systematic use by British governments of spies and provocateurs against the working-class movement.

This practice, which recurs constantly throughout the whole period, is only one side of a general process of strengthening the state's apparatus of repression against the working people. It is part of a policy whose aspects include the introduction of foreign, usually German, mercenaries into Britain, the building of barracks to isolate the army from the civil population, the establishment of the yeomanry as an armed force of the ruling class, a whole series of repressive laws like the Six Acts and the Combination Acts, and the creation of a bureaucratically controlled police force by Sir Robert Peel and his successors. Taken together these measures reflect the intensification of the class struggle as the working-class grew towards maturity.

The crushing of the Scottish reformers was followed by a direct attack on the central body, the London Corresponding Society. In May, 1794 seven leading members of the L.C.S. and six of another reform organisation, the Constitutional Society, were arrested. The most important of them were Thomas Hardy, Horne Tooke and John Thelwall. Hardy, as Secretary of the L.C.S., was the recognised leader of the London radical artisans. Tooke was of special importance because of his long standing and great prestige in the movement and because he was the main link connecting the L.C.S. with the middle-class reform societies. Thelwall was the outstanding lecturer and orator of the movement. He could seldom resist a striking gesture: at his trial a spy declared that he had been seen to blow the head off a pint of porter, exclaiming, "so should all tyrants be served".

The arrested men were all examined repeatedly before the Privy Council, where every effort was made to trick or frighten them into incriminating themselves or each other. The treatment of several of the prisoners was inhuman, and foreshadowed the prison treatment of other democratic leaders from this time until the time of Samuel Holberry, Ernest Jones and other Chartist leaders. John Thelwall was lodged in the prison charnel house, in which it had been the custom to place the corpses of prisoners who had died of cholera and other deadly



diseases. These various methods of examination and intimidation met with little success, but enough evidence was cooked up with the help of the usual informers to bring the prisoners to trial on a charge of treason. Unfortunately for the Government no Braxfield was available and the Middlesex juries were not nearly so easy to pack as those of Scotland. The first case, Hardy's, began on October 28th. His acquittal after nine days was greeted with an outburst of rejoicing which spread far beyond London. In spite of this setback the Government decided to continue the trials and the next on the list was Horne Tooke who reduced the case to absurdity by putting Pitt in the witness box, where he was forced to admit, very reluctantly, that he had once used language not essentially different from that for which Tooke and his friends stood accused. His acquittal, followed by that of Thelwall, completed the rout of the Government. The remaining charges were dropped and 800 warrants prepared for reformers all over the country were scrapped.

The next year, 1795, was one of bitter discontent and mounting anger. Food prices soared: wheat, which was 49s. 3d. a quarter in 1793 and 52s. 2d. in 1794, was 75s. 2d. in 1795 and 78s. 7d. in 1796.<sup>1</sup> Wages lagged far behind, employment was irregular, and it was in 1795 that the Berkshire justices had been forced, by the fact that the wages of the ordinary labourer would not feed a family, to adopt the famous Speenhamland scale, subsidising wages from parish funds according to the level of the price of bread. It was a device ultimately disastrous to the country workers, but without some such relief thousands would have starved to death in these years. As it was, there were hunger riots all over the country, and in many cases it was found that the troops were openly sympathetic and could not be used against the people. The climax was reached in October, when vast crowds greeted the King on his way to and from the opening of Parliament with volleys of stones and shouts of "Bread and Peace!" "No Pitt!" and "Down with George!"

In spite of all this, and their triumph in the Courts, the Corresponding Society began to decline in influence. For this there were a number of reasons. One was that its strictly legal

<sup>1</sup> These are national average prices. The price often varied widely in different places and at different times of the year.

tactics seemed inadequate to many who were suffering from the effects of war and repression. In the second place, though the war was hardly popular, Britain and France had so often been opposed during the eighteenth century that it was not difficult to create a strong anti-French feeling and smear the reformers with the accusation of being unpatriotic agents of a foreign enemy. More fundamental, perhaps, was the degeneration in France itself. In July, 1794 the Jacobins were defeated and gradually it became clear abroad that the period of revolutionary advance was over. Under the Directory, the Consulate and later the Empire, there was less and less in France about which democrats in Britain could be enthusiastic: the clear lines of conflict between privilege and democracy, oppression and liberty, could be traced no longer. As the war dragged on it seemed that whichever side won there was little prospect of the realisation of the splendid hopes of the first few years after 1789. Further, the war was creating boom conditions in certain areas and industries, and it seems probable that this prosperity made some middle-class supporters of reform more ready than formerly to accept a system under which they were prospering.

Finally, there was the continued and cumulative effect of the systematic repression with which the government met every manifestation of radicalism. In the winter of 1795-6 the "Two Acts" re-defined treason so as to make it include words as well as overt acts and so narrowed the right of assembly as to make almost all opposition meetings impossible. It became more and more difficult for even small groups of reformers to meet together and few of the activities they might wish to undertake remained legal. A huge programme of building barracks was launched, so as to end the ancient practice by which soldiers were billeted in the homes of the people to the evident danger of a weakening of their "morale". Even this proved insufficient, and large bodies of Hanoverian and other German soldiers were brought over to overawe both the civilian population and British troops. Cobbett's first imprisonment arose out of a case in which a regiment of militia who had mutinied at Ely were suppressed with great brutality by these German mercenaries. In addition, a quite new force, the yeomanry, mounted troops drawn entirely from the upper and middle classes, was raised. They had no military value whatsoever except as an instrument

to repress the working class: we shall meet them presently performing nobly on the field of Peterloo.

As the Corresponding Society and its provincial counterparts lost ground, more conspiratorial bodies like the United Scotsmen and the United Englishmen appear rather mysteriously in the background of events. In August, 1797 a group of Scottish weavers clashed bloodily with cavalry who slaughtered them in the cornfields near Tranent; but all these were no more than shadows of the United Irishmen, a really powerful movement in which national aspirations and agrarian discontent were combined with the radicalism and equalitarian beliefs of the French Revolution.

Wolfe Tone and the best leaders of the United Irishmen saw clearly that they must rely first of all on the peasants and artisans and that no struggle for national liberation could succeed that did not satisfy the demands of the "men of no property".

"It is we," he wrote, "who will better the condition of the labouring poor if ever we get into that country; it is we who will humble the pride of that execrable and contemptible corps, the country gentlemen of Ireland." (Quoted from Jackson, *Ireland Her Own*, p. 133.)

The United Irishmen not only rallied the labouring poor to the national cause, they went far to compose the differences between Catholic and Protestant, differences carefully fostered by the Anglo-Irish ruling clique. In 1794, at the time of the Hardy trial, the United Irishmen was proscribed. Tone and others had to take refuge in France: in Ireland a secret Directory began to prepare for an armed revolt.

In 1796-7 attempts to land a French army, whose arrival would have been the signal for national uprising, narrowly failed, and the Government proceeded by wholesale murders, tortures and arrests to provoke an isolated rebellion which they felt confident of being able to crush. In this black-and-tan work the newly formed yeomanry were everywhere prominent.

By the spring of 1798 all hopes of French help had been given up and plans were ready for the revolt. At this point the authorities, with the help of an informer, were able to arrest the whole national leadership, and when the people rose there was no central plan: everywhere the half-armed peasant

levies showed the utmost heroism, here and there local victories were won, but in the end the regular troops were too strong and the revolt was crushed to the accompaniment of the customary massacres.

Nevertheless these Irish events, together with the Naval mutinies at Spithead and the Nore (1797), terrified the Government into fresh repressions. In July, 1797 an Act was passed "utterly suppressing and prohibiting the societies of the United Englishmen, the United Scotsmen, United Irishmen and United Britons . . . and the London Corresponding Society, and all other corresponding societies of any city, town or place."

For the next fifteen years working-class radicalism was deprived of any possibility of open expression. But this is far from saying that an end was put to working-class activities.

### 3. *The Combination Acts*

The Act which banned the Corresponding Societies and the United Irishmen was closely followed by the even more notorious Combination Act of 1799. The last years of the eighteenth century and the first of the nineteenth were years of unprecedented industrial development. Iron production increased from 70,000 tons in 1790 to 400,000 tons in 1820: the import of raw cotton rose by 615 per cent. between 1764 and 1794 and by 445 per cent. between 1794 and 1824. The growth in the *volume* of production was accompanied by a change in the *nature* of industry: larger and deeper mines employing considerable numbers of miners, iron smelting on an increasing scale, the replacement of domestic industry by the factory—these are the things which, in the bulk, make up what we now call the Industrial Revolution. It is important not to overestimate the extent of the changes in these early stages: the transition from domestic to factory production was slow and operated unevenly, for example, in cotton before wool and in spinning before weaving. In 1800 and for some time after domestic industry still held its own, yet falling all the time more and more under the control of capitalism. Nevertheless a great change was already on the way and if, in 1800, factory production was still the exception, it was the advancing sector.

Much the same is true about the workers. The factory worker was not yet the *typical* worker but was fast becoming the most

important worker from the point of view of the development of the working class as a whole. And as a whole the character of the class was being transformed. It was becoming more concentrated, large numbers frequently working in a single enterprise for a single employer, and, in certain areas, a number of such large enterprises existing side by side meant that thousands of workers in a town or village had common interests and problems. This was also the case when, as now often happened, large numbers were working at home or in small shops for a single employer and on a uniform type of job. The increased concentration, therefore, led to an increased solidarity. And, finally, the line between masters and men became far clearer than it had been in domestic industry, or in the small-scale industry where the master worked himself alongside a handful of apprentices or journeymen. The new industry produced a new level of class opposition.

All this was intensified by the hideous conditions which prevailed generally. These are common knowledge and are not in dispute. Starvation wages, a working day of fourteen to sixteen hours, insanitary factories and still more insanitary homes—these are the commonplace of all accounts of the Industrial Revolution. Far less well known is the story of working-class struggle against these conditions and against the political system that helped to create them, and it is this struggle for better conditions and ultimately for a different order of society which is the proper subject of this book. What is important is not that the misery of the workers at this time was so great but the fact that if conditions are better to-day, any improvement is the result of the efforts of the workers themselves.

These sufferings were aggravated between the years 1790 and 1815 by the consequences of the war with France. Food prices fluctuated wildly but always in an upward direction: the price of wheat in the three decades from 1790 averaged 63s. 6d., 83s. 11d. and 87s. 6d. In 1800 it was 113s. 10d., in 1801 it was 119s. 6d. Wages, even when supplemented by poor relief, lagged far behind. The reason why parents were compelled to send their children into the factories or to work on the land at the earliest possible moment was the simple one that no worker at this time, except perhaps those in the most favoured skilled occupations, could earn enough to keep a family.

The cost of living was further increased by the fact that the

whole brunt of the cost of the war fell upon the working class; almost all the budget came from indirect taxes, so that it was estimated that a man earning 10s. a week would pay about half of it in taxes. Further, the issue of large quantities of paper money led to considerable inflation: after 1815 the reverse process of deflation put millions of pounds in the pockets of the holders of the National Debt, which the wars against Napoleon had increased from £237m. to £859m.

Under all these circumstances it was natural that trade unionism began to have a new, and to the ruling class, a more terrifying character in the last decade of the eighteenth century. Strikes, rare among the craftsmen organised in the old-style clubs, became more common and were fought out with increasing militancy. Picketing, rough handling of blacklegs, attacks on machinery and even on factories began to be common. What alarmed them most, perhaps, was the growing tendency for union organisation to be coupled with political radicalism. Pitt, and the employers in the age of Pitt, of course saw Jacobin agents in every strike or expression of discontent, just as their counterparts in our own time see the agents of Moscow. That was as absurd then as now, but it is true that Jacobinism, in the sense of democratic politics, was winning the new working class of the North: it was not nearly so easy to organise a "Church and King" mob in 1800 as it had been in 1790.

As trade unionism extended into new fields, the employers began to complain that the existing laws against combinations and conspiracy were not drastic enough. In April, 1799, the master millwrights of London presented a petition to Parliament, declaring:

"that a dangerous combination has for some Time existed among the Journeymen millwrights . . . for enforcing a general increase of their Wages, preventing the Employment of such journeymen as refuse to join in their confederacy, and other illegal Purposes, and frequent conspiracies of this Sort have been set on Foot by the journeymen, and the Masters have as often been obliged to submit, and that a Demand for a further Advance of Wages has recently been made, which not being complied with, the Men have refused to work." (*House of Common Journal*, April 5th, 1799.)

They asked for a short Act to deal with this insubordinate conduct, and Parliament was only too ready to oblige. During the debate the philanthropic Wilberforce rose to suggest that the

Bill ought to be extended to cover all combinations everywhere.

This was the origin of the notorious Combination Acts. The first was rushed through all its stages between June 17th and July 11th—so quickly that the majority of workers had no possibility of learning what was being done. The Act prohibited every kind of combination and every meeting or activity leading to such a combination: offenders could be brought before any single magistrate and were liable to three months' imprisonment. One clause, contrary to the universal custom of English law, compelled the accused to give evidence against themselves, under severe penalties for refusal. The moment the character of the Act was realised protests and petitions began to pour into Parliament, and in 1800 a new Bill was introduced by the Member for Liverpool, a borough where, by one of the freaks of the electoral system of the time, many members of the Shipwrights Union had votes and were accustomed to use them in a concerted way. The new Act made a few minor changes: two magistrates were required instead of one, and these could not be employers in the trade concerned, though they might be and often were employers in other trades. It should be added that though, in theory, employers as well as workers were forbidden to combine, there is not a single case on record of any employer being successfully prosecuted under the Act, though combinations of employers were common and undisguised.

The act of 1800 remained in force for twenty-five years, placing the utmost difficulties in the way of working class organisation. Yet the fact is that trade unionism emerged far stronger in 1825 than it had been in 1800. The Combination Act was enforced in part, irregularly and arbitrarily; it could not be enforced as a whole, and over wide sections of industry it was not commonly enforced. For one thing, it was the business of the employer to prosecute and many employers felt it wiser to let things be: in the older, craft trades the journeymen's clubs were of long standing and were seldom interfered with. Nevertheless the Act was always there, a threat in the background, a reminder to the workers not to push matters too far. In the new factory industries things were different. Here prosecutions were common. A typical example of the way in which the law worked is extracted by J. L. and Barbara Hammond from the *Report of the Select Committee on Artisans and Machinery*:

"Joseph Sherwin, cotton weaver of Stockport, where the average wage was 8s. a week for fourteen hours a day, gave a case of a master in a steam-loom factory, in 1816, who reduced wages 3d. per loom for artificial light. i.e. a reduction of 6d., to most, to some few 9d.; the master forgot to return the reduction in summer, and when winter came again (1817) he wanted to make a fresh reduction; the workers objected and left work, twelve women and eleven men. They were taken before the magistrate, who sent them out into the yard to deliberate whether they would go to work or to prison; they refused to return at the reduced price, and were given a month's imprisonment, the women at Middlewich and the men at Chester." (*The Town Labourer*, p. 130.)

Even in this small-scale example, we can see the second and principal reason why the Act failed. It was never fully enforced because the workers by their determination and ability to organise under the most difficult conditions made this impossible. There are few areas or industries from which we have not records of such struggle and organisation: a couple of outstanding cases must serve as specimens.

One was the fight of the Scottish weavers in 1804-5. It began with a demand in Glasgow for the operation of the Elizabethan Statute empowering magistrates to fix wages: the weavers asked for a new scale of piece rates to take into account the extraordinary rise in the cost of living. After immense trouble and expense the magistrates declared the request to be reasonable and a new scale was published, only to be ignored by the employers. The result was a strike on a scale never before known, involving 40,000 weavers in every part of Scotland. After three weeks the employers began to show signs of weakening, whereupon the police arrested the whole strike committee, who were sentenced to various terms of imprisonment. This brought the strike to an end, and with it the national organisation. Under the conditions of the time local organisation could usually be maintained, but national organisation only for short periods when a special campaign was in progress.

This movement of the Scottish weavers was, relatively, open and made as much use as possible of legal methods. The Combination Act had often the effect of creating secret and underground organisations, like those of the Nottingham knitting frame workers. These were skilled craftsmen, operating a complicated machine which dated back well before the Industrial



Revolution. As such, they had a long tradition of trade unionism and political radicalism. Seen in this background of perfected organisation the Luddite movement becomes something very different from the despairing outburst of machine wrecking which it is usually thought to have been. Indeed, in an industry where machinery had been established before anyone could remember, hostility to the machine *as such* is most unlikely. Luddism was an organised movement against starvation wages (6s.-7s. a week in 1811) and intolerable working conditions. As the workers rented the machines from their employers and used them in their own homes, the only method of ensuring a complete stoppage was to render the machines unusable.

The struggle began at Arnold in February, 1811 and quickly spread all over the county and beyond. By the beginning of 1812 delegates from places as far apart as Carlisle, Glasgow and Nottingham were meeting in Glasgow to plan the campaign, and the Nottingham Union Society was so firmly established that it actually had a full-time paid secretary, Gravner Henson, the outstanding leader of the Nottingham workers over a long period. In December, 1811 the Duke of Newcastle had to admit:

"the grand difficulty, is the almost impossibility of obtaining information respecting the movements and intentions of the rioters, everything is so well organised among them, and their measures are conducted with such secrecy, added to which no one dares to impeach for fear of his life, that it is scarcely possible to detect them. . . . A sort of negotiation is now carrying on between committees formed of delegates from the discontented framework knitters . . . and the hosiers and masters." (Quoted from Aspinall, *Early English Trade Unions*, p. 116.)

Throughout 1811 and 1812 and afterwards at intervals till 1817 the Luddites were active and in a number of cases were able to win substantial successes. Neither the drafting of 12,000 troops into Nottinghamshire—a larger army than Wellington took to the Peninsula—nor the passing of an Act in 1812 which made the destruction of machinery punishable by death (an Act against which Lord Byron protested in a notable speech in the House of Lords) was able to check them.

In other areas Luddism might have rather different forms and objects. In Lancashire, between 1811 and 1826, a number

of attacks, inspired by hunger and unemployment, were made upon the new mills operating steam looms in the district around Manchester. In the West Riding of Yorkshire the Luddite movement between 1811 and 1813 was partly industrial, partly revolutionary in character, and culminated in the assassination of a hated employer, named Horsfall, who had boasted that he would "ride up to the saddle-girths in Luddite blood". Here the main corps of Luddites was composed of skilled workers called "shearmen" or "croppers" (they raised the nap on the finished cloth and then gave it a fine finish with very heavy hand shears—a skilled operation) who had long been noted for their organisation and their resistance to forms of machinery which threatened their skilled status and their very means of employment. The economic blockade imposed by Britain upon France and her allies at the end of the Napoleonic Wars resulted in almost total stagnation of the clothing industry, and it was during this acute period of distress that several large manufacturers attempted to introduce the new machines.

The croppers issued, over the name of "General Ludd", an appeal to all croppers, weavers, and the public at large:

"Generous countrymen. You are requested to come forward with arms and help the Redressers to redress their Wrongs and shake off the hateful Yoke of a Silly Old Man George III, and his Son more silly and their Rogueish Ministers, all Nobles and Tyrants must be brought down. Come let us follow the Noble Example of the brave Citizens of Paris who in sight of 30,000 Tyrant Redcoats brought a Tyrant to the Ground. . . ."

Another letter informed an employer who had introduced "these detestable Shearing Frames" that if he did not take them down within a week "I will detach one of my Lieutenants with at least 300 Men to destroy them", and requested him to inform his "Bretheren in Sin" of the same. The letter continued:

"We hope for assistance from the French Emperor in shaking off the Yoke of the Rottenest, Wickedest and most Tyrannious Government that ever existed, then down come the Hanover Tyrants, and all our Tyrants from the greatest to the smallest, and we will be governed by a just Republic, and may the Almighty hasten those happy Times is the wish of Millions in this Land."

For months the clothing districts were in a state of alarm: there

was marching and counter-marching of military and armed Luddites. Even with the employment of spies, the authorities could not penetrate the inner councils of the movement, and the soldiers were known to fraternise with the Luddites whom they were supposed to be hunting.

The period of trade union illegality between 1799 and 1825 was thus one of very rich experience for the working class. New tactics, the combining of legal and illegal methods, the development of a firm solidarity, the readiness to fight back in the face of all risks, are noteworthy. Above all, it taught the lesson that the state, far from being neutral, is an instrument of the employing class, a lesson which has to be re-learnt in every generation.

The Combination Act failed in its great object of destroying trade unionism, but this is far from saying that it was entirely ineffective. Gravner Henson, who had more success than most in fighting it, and who played a prominent part in its repeal, described its effect, especially among the textile workers, as:

"a tremendous millstone round the neck of the local artisan, which has depressed and debased him to the earth: every act which he has attempted, every measure that he has devised to keep up or raise his wages, he has been told was illegal: the whole force of the civil power and influence of the district has been exerted against him because he was acting illegally . . . every committee and active man among them was regarded as a turbulent, dangerous instigator, whom it was necessary to watch and crush if possible." (Webb, *op. cit.*, p. 81.)

Certainly when the millstone was removed in 1824 there was a positive explosion of trade union activity.

#### 4. *The Age of Peterloo*

In 1815 the war against France ended with the victory of Waterloo, and the peace which followed brought new conditions and new possibilities for the working-class movement. Not that repression was less vicious: Pitt was dead and the Government was dominated by a group of his understrappers—Sidmouth and Castlereagh, Eldon and Liverpool—who had all his reactionary prejudices and none of his ability. In *The Masque of Anarchy*, written in protest against the Peterloo massacre, Shelley immortalised the gang:

"I met Murder on the way—  
He had a mask like Castlereagh—  
Very smooth he looked, yet grim;  
Seven bloodhounds followed him:

All were fat; and well they might  
Be in admirable plight,  
For one by one, and two by two,  
He tossed them human hearts to chew,  
Which from his wide cloak he drew.

Next came Fraud, and he had on,  
Like Eldon, an ermine gown;  
His big tears, for he wept well,  
Turned to millstones as they fell;

And the little children, who  
Round his feet played to and fro,  
Thinking every tear a gem,  
Had their brains knocked out by them.

Clothed with the bible as with light,  
And the shadow of the night,  
Like Sidmouth next, Hypocrisy,  
On a crocodile came by."

Still, the ending of the war made it less easy to smear reformers and trade unionists with the accusation of holding "French principles" or seeking to assist a foreign enemy.

And if the war brought misery to the people, conditions were certainly not improved by the peace. Cobbett wrote:

"*The Play* 'may be over: but oh! no! we cannot go to supper'. We have something to do. We have *forty-five millions a year for ever to pay for the play*. This is no pleasant thing. But, indeed, the play is *not* over. The *first act* is, perhaps, closed. But that grand revolution, that bright star, which first burst forth in the year 1789 is still sending forth its light over the world. In that year, feudal and ecclesiastical tyranny, ignorance, superstition, received the first heavy blow; they have since received others, and in spite of all that can be done in their favour, they are destined to perish."  
(*Political Register*, July 29th, 1815.)

The end of the war brought an immediate slump, worst in the heavy industries which it had provided with seemingly endless orders. Iron fell from £20 to £8 a ton, in Shropshire twenty-four out of thirty-four blast furnaces closed down. Thousands of colliers and iron workers were thrown on to the streets. In textiles, too, there was a slump and a rapid fall in prices which came with crushing effect upon the handloom weavers who had been earning relatively high wages under the abnormal war conditions. The demobilisation of 300,000 soldiers and sailors added to the already large number of the unemployed.

Wages fell all round, but prices were maintained at an artificially high level. The interest on the National Debt stood at £30m.—about three-fifths of the total budget—and the removal of income tax meant that an even higher proportion of the taxation fell on the masses. The supper had been eaten by the capitalists and landlords, but the workers were paying the bill, and taxes still ate up half the average wage. Food prices especially failed to come down. In the first five years after the war the price of wheat averaged 80s. 11d. a quarter—only a little less than the famine levels of the worst war years. This meant that bread, then overwhelmingly important in the working-class diet, cost about 3d. a pound when 10s. a week was a good wage. And in 1815 Parliament passed the Corn Law which prohibited the import of wheat unless the price exceeded 80s. a quarter. How much effect the Corn Law actually had on prices may be arguable: there is no doubt at all about its effect on the working class. At one stroke the Government convinced millions that Parliament was a tool of the landlords, and an extraordinary impetus was given to the demand for its reform.

The first result of the post-war crisis was an outburst of rioting which Samuel Bamford described in a famous passage:

“A series of disturbances commenced with the introduction of the Corn Bill in 1815, and continued at short intervals, until the close of the year 1816. In London and Westminster riots ensued, and were continued for several days, while the bill was discussed; at Bridport, there were riots on account of the high price of bread; at Bideford there were similar disturbances to prevent the export of grain; at Bury, by the unemployed, to destroy machinery; at Ely, not suppressed without bloodshed; at Newcastle-on-Tyne by colliers and others; at Glasgow, where blood was shed, on

account of the soup kitchens; at Preston, by unemployed weavers; at Nottingham, by Luddites, who destroyed thirty frames; at Merthyr Tydville, on a reduction of wages; at Birmingham, by the unemployed; at Walsall, by the distressed; and on December 7th, at Dundee, where owing to the high price of meal, upwards of one hundred shops were plundered." (*Passages*, Vol. I, pp. 6-7.)

With the rioting went an increased political understanding. In the new industrial towns of the North and Midlands, as well as in London, Hampden Clubs<sup>1</sup> were established, on a model suggested by Major Cartwright, in which working men met to discuss and promote reform. These clubs reached many places which had hardly been touched by the activities of the Corresponding Societies. It was impossible, in the existing state of the law, for the Clubs to be welded into a national body, but a unifying force was the growing influence of the left-wing press, and, above all, the periodical writings of William Cobbett.

Cobbett had come gradually into radicalism from a pugnacious toryism, and the sources of his belief were always very different from those of Paine and the heirs of eighteenth-century rationalism. He was, indeed, a mass of prejudices, but they were honest and generous prejudices, and his *Political Register* was always ready to attack jobs and abuses and to champion the cause of the oppressed. In the years just before Waterloo his was the one powerful voice still advocating parliamentary reform. The only thing which prevented the *Political Register* from reaching the masses was its price: owing to the tax, imposed with the intention of preventing the growth of a popular press, it had to be sold at 1s. 0½d. Now, in November, 1816, Cobbett issued a special 2d. number of *The Register*, containing no news and no contents other than his *Letter to the Journeymen and Labourers*. In it he pointed out that labour was the source of all wealth and that therefore

"with the correct idea of your own worth in your minds, with what indignation must you hear yourselves called the Populace, the Rabble, the Mob, the Swinish Multitude."

After discussing the grievances and sufferings of the people he concluded:

"The remedy . . . consists wholly and solely of such a *reform* in

<sup>1</sup> Called after John Hampden, one of the leaders of the opposition to Charles I in the Civil War of the seventeenth century.

the Commons' or Peoples' House of Parliament as shall give to every payer of *direct taxes* a vote at elections, and as shall cause members to be *elected annually*."

This letter, of which some 200,000 copies were sold, seems to have had the effect of placing democratic reform as the main political issue before the entire working class. Cobbett followed it with a regular series of unstamped 2d. *Registers* which settled down to a regular circulation of 50,000 copies. *The Times* was then selling 5,000 copies daily. It was followed by other periodicals: Wooler's *Black Dwarf*, Carlile's *Republican* and John Gast's *Gorgon*, all of which were widely read and still more widely discussed.

It is worth noting here that the radical and democratic struggle, throughout the whole period, had the sympathy, and often the active support, not only of brilliant journalists but also of nearly all the leading poets and creative writers of the age. Shelley, Byron, Hazlitt, Burns, Blake, Keats, Leigh Hunt, Landor, Peacock, together with Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey, at least in their younger days, all stood on the side of the people, and often in a revolutionary way. Against this splendid array the Tories had little to set but the single great name of Sir Walter Scott and a tail of corrupted party hacks whose highest claim was to a certain kind of wit.

Of the leading figures of the earlier period few were now active except Cartwright, and new leaders, Cobbett, Wooler, Carlile, Hone, Benbow and Hunt were coming to the fore. Of these Carlile is notable for his combination of radicalism and free thought, and for the courage and persistence with which he fought for the freedom of the press. The most immediately influential figure, apart from Cobbett, was Hunt, a brilliant orator with unlimited energy and daring which went far to outweigh his vanity and awkwardness of temper.

The reformers, of varying shades of opinion but mostly with programmes on the lines laid down by Cartwright as summarised on page 14, began to organise large mass meetings all over the country. One of these, held on Spa Fields, Clerkenwell, on December 2nd by followers of Thomas Spence, ended in a riot and what may have been an attempt at an armed rising. As so often at this time, the "evidence" is so largely supplied by police spies that it is not easy to be certain what really happened. But the Government was ready to seize the opportunity of an

incident which its agents had probably provoked to strike at the whole movement. In January, 1817 an Act was rushed through Parliament giving magistrates special powers to prohibit public meetings, and *Habeas Corpus* was suspended, as it had been from 1794 to 1806. Cobbett, who believed that the main object of this suspension was to enable the Government to seize him and suppress his *Register*, made his way to America, but radicals generally stood their ground and the movement continued to grow.

In March there was an attempt by the Lancashire unemployed to march to London to present petitions for reform and the relief of distress. Some thousands of men, mostly handloom weavers, assembled in Manchester but were attacked and dispersed by troops. Some, who had started earlier, reached Stockport where they in turn were attacked and broken up. A resolute handful pushed through as far as Ashbourne in Derbyshire. This march of the Blanketeers, as they were called from the rolled-up blankets in which their possessions were carried, much in the style of the Australian "Swag", was followed by the usual crop of arrests and imprisonments, and the anger caused by all these events, and by the fact that every legal method of protest seemed barred, led to plans for arming, to secret drillings upon the moors, and to preparations for an armed rising. These preparations were small, local, unco-ordinated and so penetrated by Government spies that they were doomed from the start. In London, Edwards was leading Thistlewood and his confederates into the Cato Street plot.<sup>1</sup> In the North the even more notorious Oliver was at his deadly work.

His method was to go from place to place, posing as the representative of a central "revolutionary" party. To each group of reformers he told his story of advanced preparations elsewhere, of supplies of arms, of large bodies of men ready to rise at a word. "Only just here," he would say, "things are not quite so well forward." His efforts were foiled in the main by a detailed exposure in *The Leeds Mercury* of June 14th, 1817, an exposure which completely discredited not only Oliver but the Government which employed him. His one success was to persuade thirty or forty Derbyshire workers, led by a stocking frame knitter Jeremiah Brandreth, a man clearly of outstanding

<sup>1</sup> See below, p. 45.



force and integrity, to leave Pentridge for a march on Nottingham. Completely alone, they were persuaded that they were part of an army. The little column was attacked by troops and dispersed: after a trial before a carefully packed jury, nineteen were transported while Brandreth and two others were hanged and beheaded at Nottingham.

Neither repression nor betrayals could check the growth of the movement. Great meetings in London, Birmingham and elsewhere were followed by preparations for an all-Lancashire rally at St. Peter's Fields in Manchester. In all the surrounding towns and villages careful preparations were made. On August 16th, 1819, contingents with bands and banners, and including many women, marched to the meeting ground in perfect order but with a discipline more terrifying to the authorities than any disorder could have been. As Hunt was beginning to speak a troop of huzzars and the Manchester yeomanry were launched at the closely packed crowd. The soldiers seem merely to have obeyed their orders mechanically: it was the upper-class yeomanry who showed a positive enthusiasm for hacking and trampling the unarmed people. Very soon eleven were dead and some 400 wounded.

Hunt, Bamford and others were arrested and charged with treason, and the Government attempted to excuse the massacre by the pretence that the meeting was a riot and perhaps the prelude to revolution. Even *The Times* was forced to declare that:

"It is now perfectly clear to all the world, that everything that was stated in the House of Commons respecting the riotous character of the Manchester meeting, by Lord Castlereagh, the Solicitor General and other honourable members, was totally and absolutely false: it was directly opposed to the truth: it does not appear to have had verisimilitude or probability in its favour." (Quoted from Bamford, *Passages*, Vol. II, p. 98.)

In spite of this exposure, and of the horror aroused even among many middle-class people by the massacre, Hunt and others received long terms of imprisonment, and the Government proceeded to improve the occasion by introducing the so-called "Six Acts" which carried the legalised repression to the highest point it had ever reached. These Acts gave magistrates power to prohibit meetings of more than fifty persons.

They forbade any kind of drilling or marches with bands or banners. They gave the right to search any houses on suspicion of their containing arms and to arrest any person carrying arms. This, it is hardly necessary to say, was only applied in practice to the lower orders. Finally, they imposed a new tax of 4*d.* a copy on all newspapers or pamphlets sold at less than 6*d.* The object of this was to prevent the circulation of such publications as Cobbett's twopenny *Register*. It was against this law, as well as that of 1817 for the suppression of "blasphemous and seditious" writings that Richard Carlile and his army of volunteer shopmen fought their six year battle from 1819 to 1825. On this latter, which for Carlile was the main point, a victory was won after 150 men and women had served a total of 200 years in prison.

It was after Peterloo, and after the Six Acts, that the Cato Street conspiracy, a design to assassinate the Cabinet, took shape. Even so, it should be noted that Thistlewood and his followers, four of whom were hanged, did no more than agree to a plan every detail of which was suggested to them by the police spy Edwards. Soon after, a widespread strike, largely political in its objects, began in and around Glasgow. Some 60,000 workers, many of them colliers, ceased work, and there was a general expectation on both sides that this would be the prelude to an armed rising. Whatever may have been intended, the word for such a rising was never given. However, a small body of strikers who had been tricked into premature action by the inevitable agent-provocateur, were involved in a skirmish with a detachment of the 10th Hussars at Bonnymuir.

After this there was a temporary diminution of radical agitation, though there is no evidence of any lessening of the popular desire for reform. But the Six Acts made the practical expression of this desire far more difficult and muzzled the popular press which had helped to weld the movement together. In addition, a trade boom began in 1820 which lasted for some five years. During this time, though prices fell considerably, exports rose from £48m. in 1820 to £56m. in 1825, while imports rose from £32m. to £44m. The growth of the home market is less easy to estimate but was probably even greater. The period of post-war dislocation having ended, the monopoly position of British capitalism in the world market now had its

effect and a period of steady expansion was beginning, punctuated rather than interrupted by the periodic cyclical crises which were now becoming more marked.

At the same time, the increasingly large scale of industrial production, as factories gained ground at the expense of domestic working and heavy industry advanced, was leading to new developments in trade unionism, despite the obstacle of the Combination Act.

One of these was the growth in some trades of a form of national organisation more effective than the loose and informal federation of trade clubs which had long been common. Sometimes these were concealed, for protective purposes, behind apparently legal Friendly Societies, as may be seen from the name of the Friendly Society of Ironfounders (1809). Another early established national body was that of the Calico Printers: in 1818 the police were able to arrest in Bolton a meeting consisting of delegates of the Calico Printers representing districts all over Britain, and it was shown in their trial that such meetings were then a settled annual occurrence.

A second feature was a tendency to form local combinations of trade societies—embryonic and often temporary trades councils. Odd account books that have survived show that mutual financial aid was very common, and to this was added joint action from time to time on matters of common interest. From 1823 to 1825 such joint committees were important in the agitation for the repeal of the Combination Act. In this a leading figure is John Gast, secretary of the London Shipwrights, and it is to Gast that credit appears due for a third development.

This was the *Trades Union*, an attempt to form some organisation which would co-ordinate the work of the trade unions all over the country. The first body of this kind known as the Philanthropic Society, or the Philanthropic Hercules, was set up in 1818, and traces of its existence can be found in Manchester, London and the Potteries. Gast printed the Articles of the Philanthropic Hercules in his journal *The Gorgon*. It had only a short life, as had a second attempt to form a trades union in Lancashire in 1826, but the fact that such ideas were abroad among the workers shows clearly enough the progress that trade unionism was making. Everywhere in radical circles the demand for parliamentary reform and for the repeal of the

Corn Law was coupled with that for the repeal of the Combination Act.

It was this growth and this popular demand, together with the fact that many people in the ruling classes were forced to realise that the Act was unenforceable and that to attempt to enforce it might be dangerous, which formed the background of the repeal agitation of 1824-5. To speak of this merely as the result of wire-pulling by Francis Place or any other individual, and to ignore the mass movement, is to give a very distorted and superficial picture of what actually happened. Place occupies a rather peculiar position in the history of the period. Originally a working tailor he later obtained a business of his own and became an important personage in radical politics by his organisation of Westminster, one of the few constituencies with a large, democratic electorate. He acted as a kind of link between the working- and middle-class radicals, and while, as in this instance, he sometimes made valuable practical contributions to the movement, his influence was on the whole dangerous as spreading petty-bourgeois ideas among the London artisans. This was especially marked, as we shall see, at the time of the Reform Bill struggle in 1831-2. Nevertheless there can be no doubt that Place was a brilliant tactician: his briefing of the Radical M.P. Joseph Hume, his management of the evidence before a Select Committee, his ability to avoid anything that might arouse the fears of his opponents, were all masterly. A Bill repealing all the Combination Laws and legalising trade unions was passed through both Houses in less than a week and without either a debate or a division.

The result was as startling to Place as to most other people. The immense strength of the trade union movement, hidden by its illegality, was now revealed. At the same time many new unions were formed and the old ones recruited rapidly. Strikes and wage demands were reported everywhere: spinners in Manchester, cutlers in Sheffield, seamen on the Tyne and Wear, shipwrights and coopers in London were on the move. *The Sheffield Mercury*, echoing the alarm of the employers, wrote:

"It is no longer a particular class of journeymen at some single point that have been induced to commence a strike for an advance of wages, but almost the whole body of mechanics in the kingdom are combined in the general resolution to impose terms on their employers."

The employers demanded that the new Act be reversed, and a Bill was prepared by the shipowners, notorious at that time as one of the most brutal and reactionary groups of employers. The whole trade union movement reacted immediately. Gast and John Doherty of the Lancashire Cotton Spinners joined with Place to secure the formation of defence committees both in London and the provincial centres. Petitions poured in, mass lobbying was kept up almost continuously, scores of workers gave evidence before a Select Committee to show the evil results of the Combination Act. The outcome was a new Act, which, while it left unions and strikes legal, made illegal many normal trade union activities and made it very difficult in practice to conduct a strike without breaking the law.

Nevertheless, the events of 1824-5, taken as a whole, were an important victory and led to permanent advances. The Act of 1825 certainly did nothing to check the advance or diminish the number of strikes. National unions like the Steam Engine Makers (now part of the A.E.U.) and the General Union of Carpenters and Joiners (now part of the A.S.W.) were formed in these years. In 1826 Lancashire cotton-spinners and miners were resisting wage cuts in a series of strikes on a scale hardly ever seen before. These strikes were, however, heavily defeated, and the trade boom ended at the close of 1825, bringing a new period of wage cuts and widespread unemployment. In these conditions the unions were forced once more on the defensive, but the demands for sweeping political changes arose once more as the first shots were fired in the campaign which was to end with the Reform Act of 1832.

## CHAPTER II

### CHARTISM

#### 1. *The Reform Bill*

TOWARDS 1830 the reform movement throughout the country began to revive, and its revival was marked by a regrouping of forces. The Government of Pitt, and to a less extent that of his successors in the Peterloo period, had been based on a working alliance of all the propertied classes—landowners, merchants, war profiteers and financiers as well as the newer industrial capitalists and the more prosperous shopkeepers and professional people—against the menace of lower-class jacobinism. After Waterloo this alliance began slowly to fall to pieces.

Increasingly, the industrialists and the middle classes began to realise that it was an unequal alliance in which they were excluded from the fruits of a political power which remained firmly in the hands of the landowners and a privileged section of the bourgeoisie. The Corn Law of 1815 was perhaps the beginning of this realisation, and it soon became apparent that the whole taxation system was so devised that the owners of land contributed least and received the greatest benefits. In addition, all the wealth of sinecures and pickings, the vast system of jobbery which had been created during the eighteenth century remained in the hands of the privileged clique. Above all, the class structure was rapidly changing. Even in 1800 the industrialists were still mostly small-scale operators, whose ambitions were to gain a foothold and make profits: as they succeeded in this, as industrial capital accumulated and the average size of enterprises increased, they became correspondingly conscious of their potential power and less willing to accept their second-class position. By the late 1820s the industrialists were very different from what they had been a generation earlier and demanded a direct share in the political control of the nation corresponding to their wealth and economic strength.

The result was a swift disintegration of the Tory Party which split into warring factions corresponding to the various sections

of the class alliance of which it had been composed; after the death of Canning a large part of these began to merge with the remnant of the Whigs. A new situation developed in which "reform" in turn became the slogan of a broad class alliance against the small privileged clique which monopolised power.

"Reform" became respectable, but this is only one side of the change. Up till then, the demand for reform had been a largely working-class demand, but the demand of a working class led by a section of the more progressive middle class. During the same period, the workers, in a generation of bitter struggles, had come to see that the capitalists *as a whole* were their enemies. The advance of trade unionism before, and still more after the repeal of the Combination Acts in 1825, had solidified their ranks in a quite startling way, and, just at the very point at which the broad reform alliance of which we have been speaking took shape, there began a new process of differentiation. Just because this alliance was led by the people whom the workers had learnt to regard as their enemies, their most advanced sections now began to reject this leadership and move into action as an independent force. It is in the struggle around the Reform Bill that we can see the first traces of the new class relations which mark the period of Chartism.

Meanwhile, the structure of the working class was itself changing. In the generation from 1800 the advance of industry had greatly increased the number of factory workers and still more their weight within the working class. During the same period the number of hand-workers had declined, and their situation became yearly more desperate. Their distress was shared by a considerable portion of the former labour aristocracy, the skilled artisans. In the rural areas the process of enclosure was now almost complete and the farm workers were reduced to depths of poverty which forced thousands of them to migrate to the new industrial centres, there to compete with those already employed and with the still more wretched Irish labourers now entering England in great numbers.

In Lancashire, Yorkshire, London, the Midlands and the Scottish Lowlands vast and horrifying industrial slums were rising. An unforgettable picture of the state of affairs there may be found in Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, a book which not only gives a fully documented account of the misery of the masses but gives also, what the orthodox

historians so conveniently omit, a picture of their struggles and their unconquerable spirit. Of that spirit we shall have ample evidence in the course of this chapter.

By the end of the 1820s it was clear that everything was ready for a renewal of the political struggle. The movement was recovering from the defeats and severe repression of the Peterloo period. The abundant signs of crisis within the ruling circle helped to give a new confidence, a confidence which came also from the rich trade union experience of the preceding years. At the same time, a severe economic crisis began. Factories closed or went on short time, unemployment increased rapidly, strikes and lockouts took place everywhere, in the countryside arson and sabotage increased as the mythical Captain Swing<sup>1</sup> resumed his nightly rides, from the industrial areas reports began to come of workers arming and drilling.

The left-wing press once more became formidable. Cobbett's *Political Register*, which had been in considerable difficulties, greatly increased its circulation, and in 1830 Hetherington and Bronterre O'Brien started the greatest, perhaps, of all the radical journals, *The Poor Man's Guardian*. In the *Guardian* basic socialist ideas were put forward in a vivid, popular form for the first time in Britain. These ideas had been taking shape in the previous decade, and their appearance is an aspect of the growing maturity of the working class. Originating, like much else in this time, from the work of Robert Owen, and giving a new and revolutionary turn to the labour theories of value developed by Ricardo, these socialist ideas had been elaborated in a number of books and pamphlets such as John Gray's *Lecture on Human Happiness* and Thomas Hodgskin's *Labour Defended*, both published in 1825, William Thompson's *Labour Rewarded* (1827), and, a little later, John Francis Bray's *Labour's Wrongs and Labour's Remedy* (1838-9).

In a sense, socialist ideas in England had a long and splendid history. Many thinkers and revolutionary leaders, from John Ball, the rebel hedge-priest who inspired the great rising of 1381 and the humanist philosopher Sir Thomas More, to the Digger Winstanley and the Leveller Walwyn, had dreamed and spoken of a right commonwealth where "money did not bear all the strokes", where "all things were in common" and

<sup>1</sup> Captain Swing is a fictitious character under whose name the village workers burnt ricks and smashed threshing machines.



where free communities held and worked their land in fellowship. But all these were essentially *peasant* ideas, looking backward to an idealised village commune, though all, to a greater or less degree, contained also the seeds of the future. With the defeat of the popular forces in the English Revolution of the seventeenth century these ideas died away, though they were perhaps never quite forgotten, and the socialism of the early nineteenth century was a new socialism, springing from the new working class which had been created by the industrial revolution.

Though it, too, was born out of the past, it looked forward to a new world which would be transformed by reason and science in the service of the working people. And, while it could not have arisen without the creation of the working class by large-scale capitalist industry, it would have developed less quickly, and with a less passionate optimism, if the French Revolution had not set men's hearts on fire with the assurance, as Mary Wollstonecraft, who added to the armoury of radicalism the conception of the equality of the sexes, put it, of "more virtue and more happiness than has hitherto blessed our globe". (*Rights of Men*, p. 119.)

It was Mary Wollstonecraft's husband, William Godwin, who helped to shape these hopes with one of the great formative books of the time, *Political Justice* (1793). Godwin, it is true, was rather anarchist than socialist. Believing that all government was evil, he looked forward to a society of loosely linked village communities, whose inhabitants obeyed only the dictates of enlightened reason, which would be enough to remove poverty and exploitation, since reason and justice enjoin "giving to each according to his needs". Private property would not be formally abolished, but would become unimportant, because,

"If justice reigned a state of equality would prevail. Labour would become light as rather to assume the appearance of agreeable relaxation and gentle exercise. . . . The vices which are inseparably joined to the present system of property would expire in a state of society where all shared alike the bounties of nature. The narrow principles of selfishness would vanish."

Most influential of all Godwin's beliefs, perhaps, was that man is a product of his environment, and can change himself by changing it. In this he was followed by Owen and all the early socialists.

They took from him also, and from Thomas Spence, the conception of a socialist (or co-operative, the two words are used interchangeably at this time) society as consisting of a network of village communities with the minimum of outside control. Spence put forward, in a series of books and pamphlets published around 1800, the view that all lands should be public property, with the parish as the basis of administration. It should be freely rented to all, and the rent of land, paid to the parish, should replace all existing taxes. The parish in turn would contribute whatever (small) sums might be needed to the national exchequer.

It is easy to see how much these ideas of Godwin and Spence contributed to Owen's theories, and thence to the wide popular movement which accepted them. Owen, a self-made man, first became famous for the model community he built up around his cotton mill at New Lanark between 1800 and 1820. Here he proved beyond all question that he could pay higher wages for shorter hours than any of his competitors, provide lavish social services, and yet produce substantial profits. He proved also that by these improved conditions the character of the workers was transformed. Crime and misery vanished. Human nature, he concluded, was not fixed and unalterable but a product of human life: here, it seemed, was solid, positive evidence for the belief in human perfectability held by Godwin and his school. Here too was a refutation of the views widely held among the ruling class that if the workers were poor and miserable it was because they were by nature inferior and sinful. So far, however, Owen met with little opposition, but was praised and patronised by many of the most respectable people.

Yet he was not satisfied. He looked at society and saw that even with the existing technical level plenty was possible for all—yet millions were starving and in rags. In his *Report to the County of Lanark* (1821) he opened with the statement that "Manual labour, properly directed, is the source of all wealth and of national prosperity"—a proposition that was indeed common ground to all orthodox political economists from John Locke and Sir William Petty in the seventeenth century to Ricardo in the early nineteenth. Owen, however, gave it a sharp twist to the left, concluding that if the labour of the workers did not bring them prosperity it was because they

were robbed. The moment he began to advance such views his popularity vanished. Dukes and bishops no longer visited him or sought his advice, and he soon found that if he was to gain a hearing it was to the exploited—to the working people—that he must turn. It was the greatness of Owen that he was able to take this step, just as it was his weakness that he could never really identify himself with them, but must always come to them as a benefactor from above, a saviour who would lift them out of their misery. Because he could never see the workers as the class actually making history, he still thought of socialism, in the shape of his villages of co-operation, as the outcome of the victory of pure reason and not of the struggle of a class for emancipation.

It was through the work of his followers—Gray, Hodgskin, Thompson and Bray—that his ideas began to acquire a character which brought them more closely into touch with the life and experience of the masses. Thompson, for example, began his *Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth* with a series of questions which were, in essence if not in form, the questions that millions of workers were actually asking:

“How comes it that a nation abounding more than any other in the rude materials of wealth, in machinery, dwellings and food, in intelligent and industrious producers, with all the apparent means of happiness, with all the outward semblances of happiness exhibited by a small and rich portion of the community, should still pine in privation?”

“How comes it that the fruits of the labour of the industrious after years of incessant and successful exertion, are mysteriously and without imputation of fault to them, without any convulsion of nature, swept away?”

“Why is it that the system enriches the few at the expense of the mass of producers, to make the poverty of the poor more helpless, to throw back the middling classes upon the poor, that a few may be enabled, not only to accumulate in perniciously large masses the national capital, but also by means of such accumulations to command the products of the yearly labour of the community?” (*Inquiry*, p. xviii.)

Thompson answered his questions by pointing to the monopoly of the means of production in the hands of a small class:

“The idle possessor of the inanimate instruments of production not only secures to himself by their possession as much enjoyment

as the most diligent and skilful of the real, efficient producers, but in proportion to the amount of his accumulations, by whatever means acquired, he procures ten times, a hundred times, a thousand times as much of the articles of wealth, the products of labour, and means of enjoyment, as the utmost labour of such efficient producers can procure for them." (*Inquiry*, p. 164.)

Similarly, Hodgskin finds in the profit of the capitalist the cause of the worker's poverty:

"Before a labourer can have a loaf of bread he must give a quantity of labour more than the loaf costs, by all that quantity which pays the profit of the farmer, the corn dealer, the miller and the baker, with profit on all the buildings they use; and he must moreover pay with the produce of his labour the rent of the landlord. . . . Whether there are Corn Laws or not, the capitalist must allow the labourer to subsist, and as long as his claims are granted and acted on he will never allow him to do more." (*Labour Defended*, quoted from Morris, *From Cobbett to the Chartists*, pp. 76-7.)

These socialist thinkers were able to make a telling criticism of the evils of capitalist society, but their isolation from the mass movement still led them to look for a solution in terms of pure reason. What they felt was needed was propaganda in general, to convince all classes that the system was unjust. Lacking a historical sense of the development of society, they thought of socialism rather as an *idea* which could be grasped and applied at any moment when it happened to be advanced with sufficient force and clarity to convince all classes that capitalism was unreasonable and unjust, than as the outcome of a whole process of growth and struggle.

It was not till they were seized by the masses that these socialist ideas began to reveal their full richness. Compare, for example, the abstract way in which Hodgskin writes about class relations in *Labour Defended*:

"I am certain, however, that till the triumph of labour be complete; till productive industry alone be opulent, and till idleness alone be poor; till the admirable maxim that "he who sows shall reap" be solidly established; till the right of property shall be founded on the principles of justice, and not on those of slavery; till *man* shall be held more in honour than the clod he treads on or the machine he guides—there cannot, and there ought not to be either peace on earth or goodwill amongst men." (Morris, *op. cit.*, p. 78.)

with the simple strength of an anonymous contributor to *The Poor Man's Guardian* of March, 1832:

"When I hear master manufacturers and tradesmen say—We must get large profits to enable us to pay you high wages, my blood curdles within me. I wish at once that I were a dog, or anything else, rather than a man. . . . The manufacturer's profits, therefore, like the land-stealers' rent and the tithe-stealers' tithes, and all other profits, was obtained solely by keeping wages down. . . . There is no common interest between working men and profitmakers."

This understanding that "there is no common interest" led directly to a new conception of the state as the organ of the ruling class directed against the people, which was close to that of Marx. O'Brien, taking the whole of the socialist literature of his time, popularised it in biting articles which went right home to his working-class readers.

"All the crimes and superstitions of human nature have their origin in this cannibal warfare of riches against poverty, the desire of one man to live on the fruits of another's labour is the original sin of the world",

he wrote (*Poor Man's Guardian*, April 27th, 1833). And again:

"Up to this moment, all Governments of the world have been nothing but conspiracies of rich against poor, *alias* of the strong and cunning to rob and to keep in subjection the weak and ignorant. The present Government of England is of this sort." (*ibid.*, March 7th, 1835.)

The wide acceptance of socialist ideas in the 1830s, and their unification with the instinctive class feeling of the masses, mark a completely new phase in the movement, a phase in which the working class was ceasing to follow the middle-class radicals and was moving towards the independent action of the Chartist decade. The older radicals, Hunt, Hone or Cobbett, who still looked backward to the lost, pre-industrial world of the petty producer, never accepted or even understood Owen's ideas. Thus, Cobbett spoke contemptuously of his scheme "for establishing innumerable communities of paupers". It was the new, working-class radicals who read *The Poor Man's Guardian* and joined the National Union of the Working Classes and, later, the Working Men's Association, who welcomed Owenism and soon passed beyond it.

In this decade, schemes for model communities and for producers' co-operative societies, which were seen as steps towards a socialist commonwealth, were being mooted everywhere. Most of them were abortive, or at best short lived, but they were only a partial expression of the wide co-operative or socialist movement, something of whose extent can be judged from Richard Pankhurst's life of Thompson:

"By the end of the eighteen-thirties the Co-operators were circulating tracts at the rate of 2,000,000 in three years, and the 'Co-operative missionaries' Thompson had instituted were regularly visiting 350 towns, giving as many as 1,450 lectures a year, 604 of them on theology and ethics. In Manchester 1,000 pamphlets were distributed every Sunday; 40,000 were annually given away in London; fifty pounds was raised at a single meeting from the sale of literature. . . . Flora Tristan, after a visit to England in 1839, computed that out of a population of sixteen millions, at least half a million were Socialist." (R. K. P. Pankhurst, *William Thompson*, pp. 197-8.)

Finally, with Chartism, this movement passed beyond the stage of utopian projects to that of a national struggle to win control of the state and use it in the interest of the working people. The Charter was seen by its most clear-sighted advocates as the key to a new society: they would have had no difficulty in accepting the declaration of *The British Road to Socialism*, the Programme of the Communist Party, that

"The people cannot advance to Socialism, therefore, without real political power, which must be taken from the hands of the capitalist minority and firmly grasped by the majority of the people, led by the working class. Only by this means can democracy become a reality."

O'Brien came very close to this conception when he wrote:

"With the Charter, national ownership of land, currency and credit, people would soon discover what wonders of production, distribution and exchange might be achieved by associated labour, in comparison with individual labour. Thence would gradually arise the true social state, or the realities of socialism, in contradistinction to the present dreams of it. And doubtless the ultimate consequences would be the universal prevalence of a state of society not essentially different from that contrived by Owen. But the idea of jumping at once from our present iniquitous and corrupt state of society into Owen's social paradise, without

any previous recognition of human rights and without establishing a single law or institution to rescue the people from their present brutalised condition of ignorance and vassalage is a chimera." (*National Reformer*, January 30th, 1847.)

It is easy to see that O'Brien's ideas here are still vague as compared with those of *The Communist Manifesto*, written only a year later. But it is even clearer that *The Manifesto* did not arise out of a void but precisely out of a situation in which thousands of workers were thinking in just these terms. Marx and Engels lived in England during much of the Chartist decade, their contacts with Chartists were close and friendly, they studied and valued the writings of the early English socialists. Of course they added much, and gave a new shape and clarity to ideas that had often been confused, especially by showing that socialism, like capitalism, is a definite stage in the development of society, both growing out of the stages which preceded them as the outcome of their conflicts and contradictions. All the same, it would hardly be possible to over-stress the contribution which men like Owen, Thompson and O'Brien made to the evolution of Marxism, and, through it, to the whole working-class movement of our own times.

The very publication of *The Poor Man's Guardian* at this time was an act of class defiance. One of the methods by which the Governments of the day tried to hamstring the working-class movement was the imposition of a tax on all newspapers, which had the effect of placing them out of the reach of working-class readers. Cobbett and others had tried various devices for getting round this tax with some success: *The Guardian* fought it openly by coming out at 1d. with the slogan "Published in Defiance of the Law, to try the Power of Right against Might". Other papers in various parts of the country also proceeded to defy the law, and this struggle against the "tax on knowledge" was won, after some 500 newsagents and street sellers had been imprisoned, by the reduction of the tax to 1d. in 1836 and its abolition in 1855.

This penetration of the working class by such socialist ideas helped to give the revived movement a new character. The programme of the National Union of the Working Classes and Others, when it was founded in the spring of 1831, was still that of the most advanced radicalism. As summarised in *The Poor Man's Guardian*, it ran:

"Extirpation of the Fiend Aristocracy; Establishment of a Republic, viz. Democracy by Representatives elected by Universal Suffrage; Extinction of hereditary offices, titles and distinctions; Abolition of the unnatural and unjust law of primogeniture; equal distribution of property among all children; Cheap and rapid administration of justice; Abolition of the Game Laws; Repeal of the diabolical imposts on Newspapers, Almanacs and other channels of knowledge; emancipation of our fellow-citizens the Jews; Introduction of Poor Laws into Ireland; Abolition of the Punishment of Death for offences against property; Appropriation of the Revenues of the 'Fathers in God', the Bishops, towards maintenance of the Poor; Abolition of Tithes; Payment of every Priest or Minister by his Sect; The 'National Debt' not the debt of the Nation; Discharge of the Machinery of Despotism, the Soldiers; Establishment of a National Guard." (*Poor Man's Guardian*, March 3rd, 1831.)

Nevertheless there was a growing conception abroad that the goal of the immediate struggle for political democracy was a new form of society, and a realisation that this could never be won so long as the workers followed the lead of the middle class.

The older idea was still strong, however, which is one of the reasons why the story of the struggle around the Reform Bill is so complex. As we have seen, by 1829 there was very widespread discontent and a growing popular demand for reform. Early in 1830 the Birmingham Political Union was formed, with a middle-class and industrialist leadership and a working-class rank and file. The Birmingham model was quickly copied and in a few months the country was covered with a network of Political Unions: it was observed, however, that in many of the northern industrial towns they were much more clearly working-class in character and outlook and that in some towns *two* Unions were formed, one middle and the other working-class.

The Political Unions soon formed the left-wing mass support of a very broad movement which extended all the way from Whig aristocrats like Grey and Russell, through the "left" Whigs led by Durham and Brougham and the "philosophic radicals" who derived their ideas from Bentham. All were prepared for reform of some kind: the actual Reform Bill which emerged in 1831 was a compromise between the various and ultimately incompatible class interests comprehended in this broad alliance. For the moment it was possible to maintain its



unity by an attack upon the corruptions and absurdities of the existing system.

This corruption had, indeed, become so gross that it could no longer be defended except upon the ground that *any* change was dangerous to society. The House of Commons had long lost whatever claim it may once have had to be a representative body. Not only were those with a right to vote a tiny fraction of the population, not only were they enfranchised in a quite haphazard way, but the whole process of election had become an insolent farce. In the counties enclosures and the development of capitalism in agriculture had decimated the old forty-shilling freeholders in whom the right of voting was vested, and county seats were "fixed" by groups of great landowners.

In the boroughs things were even worse. Few changes had been made since the early seventeenth century, and in the immense population changes since that time many old boroughs had decayed and huge new towns had grown up. So that while two members still "represented" Old Sarum where "nothing remains but a thorn bush", or Appleby, where "the right of voting is vested in some pigsties", places like Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield and Birmingham had no members at all. In other boroughs the right to elect had been usurped by the corporation, and the corporations were almost without exception self-appointing bodies dominated by some peer or big local landowner.

In the few places where there were larger numbers of voters, the system of open voting led to such universal corruption that, as a radical handbook of abuses, *The Extraordinary Black Book*, said:

"There are not half a dozen places in the kingdom where an honest man, of known competence and character, can hope to be successful against a man who will expend a fortune to succeed."

A fortune was certainly needed, as in the years immediately before 1832 a successful candidate might expect to spend anything from £10,000 to £20,000 upon a single election. In the Ipswich election of 1820 the Whig candidates spent nearly £800 for free drinks in one public house alone. The fact that rich men were prepared to lay out such sums is itself an indication of the solid advantages which membership of the House of Commons might be expected to bring. A contested election

on such a scale was nevertheless a costly gamble, and whenever possible contests were avoided by arrangements between rival interests. It has been estimated that at this time some 471 members out of 658 were nominated by only 277 people, of whom more than half were peers. Naturally, such nominated members represented nobody except their patrons.

Parliamentary corruption, of course, did not stand alone. The Church, the law, the court, the civil services, the Army, the Navy were all run on the same basis of influence and graft. Thousands of sinecures and pensions existed for the exclusive benefit of the ruling clique and its parasites. But the radicals saw Parliament as the heart and centre of corruption, and fought for Parliamentary reform as the essential first step towards an efficient, cheap and reasonably clean system of administration.

In August, 1830 a general election, held under the stimulation of the revolutions in France and Belgium, ended the long epoch of Tory rule: a narrow majority of Whigs and reform Tories was returned, though the vast number of rotten and pocket boroughs made it impossible for the returns to reflect to more than a small extent the overwhelming popular demand for change. When Grey formed his Government his first action was the ruthless suppression of the movement which had been spreading among the agricultural labourers of south and south-east England.

This movement, directed first against the new threshing machines which threatened the winter employment of the villagers, extended quickly to a demand for higher wages—2s. 6d. a day in Kent and Sussex, 2s. a day in Wiltshire and Dorset. In village after village crowds destroyed the threshing machines, burnt stacks, broke into workhouses and forced promises of better wages from the terrified farmers. Yet it is notable that in many cases the crowds behaved with marked restraint, and very few cases of injury to persons are recorded. There was certainly no restraint about the actions of the Government. Nine men were hanged, at least 457 transported and hundreds more imprisoned. In these Bloody Assizes the Whig régime proved itself every bit as repressive as the Tories, a fact which was by no means unnoted at the time.

This village revolt had a double effect. On the one hand it forced upon the Whigs a realisation of the depth and extent of

popular discontent. On the other it gave them a chance to reassure the propertied classes, who could see that the new Government had no undue tenderness towards the masses and that any reform they undertook would be likely to strengthen rather than diminish the power of wealth. An attempt to turn the episode against the left-wing of the reform movement failed when Cobbett, arrested on a charge of incitement, secured his acquittal after a trial in which he took the offensive throughout, called Grey, Melbourne and Brougham as witnesses and subjected them to a humiliating cross-examination from the dock.

The distrust with which the workers regarded both the Whig Government and the capitalists who were now taking the lead in the reform agitation was reflected in the formation early in 1831 of the National Union of the Working Classes, whose leaders were Lovett and Hetherington. This body is often known as the Rotundists from the name of their customary meeting hall, later famous in the sporting world as the Blackfriars Ring. The N.U.W.C. was, at the beginning, an organisation of the London artisans, but, like the Corresponding Society whose form of organisation it largely adopted, it became the parent and guiding body of a number of others throughout the country. In some places it came into conflict with the Political Unions; in others, where these Unions were wholly or mainly working class in character, they co-operated so closely that it is not always easy to distinguish between them. In Manchester the Union of the Working Classes had twenty-seven branches and 5,000 members.

The influence of the N.U.W.C. was certainly considerable, but Place and Attwood, a Birmingham banker, leaders of the National Political Union, which had been formed to co-ordinate the Political Unions in the localities, had a very great practical advantage. Their immediate job was to mobilise support for the actual Reform Bill which was introduced in March, 1831. This Bill had two main features: first, that it abolished a number of small rotten boroughs and distributed their members to the counties and among towns like Manchester, Leeds and Sheffield which had previously been unrepresented, and, second, that the franchise was extended to include the middle classes in the boroughs and the tenant and leasehold farmers in the counties.

This fell a long way short of the historic radical demand for

manhood suffrage, annual parliaments and vote by ballot; towards the two latter, indeed, no advance was made. Nor did it have anything to offer the workers, who were still to be left without the right to vote. Yet even Cobbett, with hesitation and misgivings, decided to support the Bill on the ground that, unsatisfactory as it was, it was the most that could be expected from the existing Parliament but that it should be regarded merely as a first instalment. He, and many others, hoped that the new Parliament, to be elected after the Bill had become law, would include a powerful group of radicals and that better things might be expected of it.

The Rotundists did not share this optimism. Their view was that the industrial capitalists and middle classes were making use of the workers and that when their own political aspirations had been satisfied it would be more and not less difficult to secure a further measure of reform of a genuinely popular character. *The Poor Man's Guardian* wrote of the Bill as "a wicked, tyrannous, dishonest and diabolical measure", and warned its readers:

"You will be starved to death by thousands, if this Bill passes, and thrown on to the dunghill, or on to the ground, naked, like dogs." (*Poor Man's Guardian*, April 11th, 1832.)

a prophecy whose fulfilment was later claimed, not without justification, in the Poor Law of 1834.

Meanwhile, the Bill began its progress through Parliament. After it had secured its second reading by a majority of one vote, the Government was defeated in Committee and a new general election took place in May. In many constituencies, for the first time in generations, the old system of influence and nomination collapsed. The Whigs won seventy-four out of eighty county seats, and secured a majority of 136. Once more the Bill was introduced and passed through all its stages in the House of Commons only to be rejected in the Lords by a majority of forty-one. The greatest part of this hostile vote was composed of the Bishops and the host of war-profiteer peers created by Pitt and his successors.

This defeat in the Lords created a new situation: thousands of workers who were in sympathy with the Rotundist criticism of the Bill now saw, or could easily be persuaded to see, the issue as one between the Lords, standing for the system so aptly

named "Old Corruption" and the people. On the whole it may be said that the masses "voted with their feet" for Cobbett's view that this Bill should be supported critically as a first instalment of the full democratic programme which they still demanded. Huge demonstrations, often culminating in riots, took place all over the country. In Derby the prison was stormed, in Nottingham the castle was set on fire, while in Bristol where the rioters had virtual possession of the town for several days there was still more widespread damage. In London crowds attacked Bishops and Tory peers in the streets, broke the windows of their houses, and the open air meetings of the Rotundists attracted vast audiences.

Perhaps the most striking example of their influence took place in March, 1832, when the Government proposed the holding of a day of national fasting on account of the cholera epidemic. The Rotundists, who regarded cholera as the result of hunger and bad sanitation rather than as a manifestation of divine wrath, characterised the hypocritical proposal as a "*national farce*" and invited the people to end a march through the streets with a series of public dinners in various parts of London. It was estimated at the time that no less than 100,000 people took part in this demonstration.

Nevertheless, it was Place and the National Political Union who retained the practical leadership of the masses in this crisis, and even the strength of the Rotundists could be turned indirectly to advantage. The widespread and genuine anger of the people was used as a proof that the Bill was the only alternative to revolution and chaos. The threat of revolution was used not only to intimidate the Tories but to prevent the Whig Government from doing the deal with them for which some of its members were more than ready. This was the double point of the slogan "The Bill, the whole Bill and nothing but the Bill", which the Political Union adopted as its rallying call.

During the autumn and winter of 1831-2 the mass pressure continued in various forms. In December the Rotundists organised a National Convention which, anticipating the tactics of Chartism, drew up a draft of a Reform Bill of its own. Benbow, an old radical and later a Chartist, brought forward his plan for a political general strike, "A Grand National Holiday", as he called it. *The Poor Man's Guardian* published a special supplement dealing with the technique of

street fighting and the most effective methods of building barricades. There were many protests against the savage punishments of workers arrested during the October riots: in Nottingham, where two men were hanged, a huge, angry crowd stood in silence broken only by shouts of "Murder" and "Blood".

The Bill was introduced a third time into the House of Commons in December, and on April 14th, 1832, the Lords passed it by a majority of nine, intending to mangle it in Committee. When they began to do so, Grey resigned and Wellington tried to form a new Government. In the face of rising pressure from virtually the whole nation, his attempt did not even secure the backing of his own party. The King was forced to recall Grey, who now insisted on a promise that if necessary a sufficient number of new peers would be created to force the Bill through the House of Lords. Upon this the Lords and the Tory Party gave up the struggle and the Bill was finally passed into law on June 7th, 1832.

The passing of the Reform Bill marked an important new stage in the bourgeois revolution in Britain by bringing the industrial capitalists and their middle-class supporters within the circle of those in whose hands lay political power. It began a period of fifty-five years during which the Whig Party remained in office with only short intervals. During this time the Whigs transformed themselves into Liberals. The Reform Bill created the political institutions necessitated by the economic revolution of the two preceding generations.

From the standpoint of a history of the working-class movement the importance of the Reform Bill is perhaps best indicated by the fact that this measure is always popularly known as the Reform *Bill*, rather than the Reform *Act*; the name rightly implies that what mattered most of all was not the actual provisions of the Act, which were meagre enough compared to the demands of the radicals, but the intense class battles which had to be fought before the Bill became the Act, the expectations which it aroused and disappointed, the new epoch of class relations which began about 1830.

For the *last* time for many years the bulk of the workers went into the political battle behind the progressive bourgeoisie, for the *first* time a large section went into battle as an independent force. The hopes of the former were betrayed, the warnings

of the latter were justified. Further, the very success of the bourgeois reformers ended the broad class alliance, including both workers and capitalists, which had brought in the Reform Bill: now the battle for democracy could be fought only under the leadership of the working class. The Reform Bill is therefore the prelude to Chartism, to the assumption by the workers of this role of leadership in a great nation for the first time in history.

## 2. *Unions and Bastilles*

"The hypocritical, conniving, and liberty undermining Whigs", wrote Lovett in 1837. (Lovett, *Life and Struggles*, p. 114.) And by that date this verdict had the endorsement of the overwhelming majority of the British working class. The leaders who had been urging that independent working-class action was the only hope were no longer speaking to or for a minority. This great change was begun by the betrayal of the Reform Bill: it was completed by the policy of the Reform Parliament elected after the passing of that Bill, a policy which showed that its result was the strengthening of the power of the state against the working people. Two things above all hammered home this lesson: the attitude of the Government to the trade unions and the passing of the Poor Law of 1834.

We have been accustomed to see the happenings of these years rather as a swinging of the pendulum—a movement from political to industrial activity and back to politics once more. This is misleadingly simple. True that after 1832 there was a wide and deep sense of frustration, a turn away from political activity of the kind which had been tried, in which the workers were mainly a subsidiary force in the tail of the middle class. The Political Unions went down, the N.U.W.C. disappeared as its leading figures turned to other forms of activity, notably co-operation and the fight for civil liberties. *The Poor Man's Guardian* ended its splendid career in 1835.

But all this did not mean that the masses turned from politics in the broad sense of the struggle for a genuine democracy in which the power of the state should be in the hands of the people and exercised in their interests. It did mean that in this struggle there was an emphasis on new *tactics*: the failure of the methods so far used led to attempts to find different and more effective methods, especially in the field of trade union

activity. Yet here, again, we get a false picture if we think of the great trade union surge of 1834 as a freak, a kind of miracle, as it is often represented, and not as a culmination of a whole advance which had been going on ever since the repeal of the Combination Acts in 1824.

This advance had not been uninterrupted: there was a setback after the defeats of 1825-6, but in the next year the advance was resumed. At the head were the factory workers of Lancashire, where the cotton-spinners took the initiative in 1829 in setting up the Grand National Union of the United Kingdom which embraced spinners in England, Scotland and Ireland. This proved to be premature, but from this date a county organisation for Lancashire, rapidly becoming the most important centre of the cotton spinning industry, seems to have been firmly established.

John Doherty, the spinners' leader, next proceeded to make this the foundation for a much more ambitious structure, the National Association for the Protection of Labour. This federation, formed in 1830, soon included not only other groups in the textile industries—calico printers, silk weavers and hosiery workers—but many local societies of mechanics, moulders and others. Later it was extended to include colliers, potters and woollen workers in the West Riding, and its weekly paper *The Voice of the People*, reached a circulation of 3,000. The N.A.P.L., besides supporting many strikes, took an active part in the agitation for a Ten Hour Bill, which from this time began to attract wide support in all the factory areas.

Like other earlier schemes the N.A.P.L. was short lived, ending in 1832, but it was only one of many significant trade union developments. In Northumberland and Durham the miners formed their first strong union in 1830, which lasted for two years under the leadership of Tommy Hepburn, and only collapsed after the defeat of a heroic six-months strike, a feature of which was the wholesale use of troops and marines as agents of the coalowners.

About the same time a General Trades Union was established in the building industry, which organised not only the skilled trades but also the labourers. It held an annual meeting, "the Builders' Parliament", with delegates from all lodges, and there were also district organisations. In 1830, too, a Potters' Union was set up. By 1833 it had 8,000 members, mostly in Staffordshire



but extending to Newcastle, Derby and Bristol. These, and other similar developments, are sufficient to prove that the sudden rise of the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union in 1833-4 was no sudden revulsion from politics but the outcome of a decade of hard spade-work and growing militancy. What was new was the character given to the movement by the impact of Owen and his utopian socialism.

In 1829 Owen had returned from America, where the dramatic failure of his New Harmony colony, though it had not shaken his conviction of the correctness of his ideas, had made him ready to consider other means of realising them. Owen's mood, indeed, coincided very closely with that of the British working class in this respect.

He found on his return small Co-operative Societies of Producers established among the skilled artisans of London and elsewhere, which were beginning to join forces and set up Exchanges for the sale of their goods. It was hoped that in this way co-operative production would gradually extend till it had superseded capitalist production. In 1832 Owen himself undertook the most ambitious of all these ventures, the National Equitable Labour Exchange, which opened in Gray's Inn Road. The fate of these exchanges cannot be described here; what is important about them is that they brought Owen into contact with the trade unionists and turned his attention to the possibility of using the trade union movement as a means of establishing an Owenite socialist commonwealth.

He began to dream of a society in which the unions became vast productive bodies, dominating the industries which they covered, and ultimately replacing the state by a network of inter-related co-operatives. Owen believed that this could be done quite peacefully, and opposed any idea of class struggle. The workers, who were in practice engaged in a class struggle every day of their lives, could not share this view, and their more militant attitude was expressed by the writings of James Morrison and J. E. Smith in *The Pioneer* and *The Crisis*. The confusion created by these opposing ideas was one of the main causes of the swift collapse of the Grand National in 1834. The experience of the workers led them to militant ideas and action, but the immense prestige of Owen, which had given the movement a figure-head and a focus, prevented these ideas from being adequately put forward.

Nevertheless, a new concept was abroad. In October, 1833, *The Poor Man's Guardian* wrote:

"A grand national organisation, which promises to embody the physical power of the country is silently but rapidly progressing; and the object of it is the sublimest that can be conceived, namely—to establish for the productive classes complete dominion over the fruits of their industry." (*Poor Man's Guardian*, October 19th, 1833. Quoted from Max Morris, *From Cobbett to the Chartists*, p. 87.)

*The Poor Man's Guardian* believed that union action would win control of the state. *The Pioneer* put forward the view that it would render it superfluous:

"If every member of the Union be a constituent, and the Union itself become a vital member of the State, it instantly erects itself into a House of Trades which must supply the place of the present House of Commons, and direct the commercial affairs of the country, according to the will of the trades which compose the associations of the industry. This is the ascendancy scale by which we arrive to universal suffrage. It will begin in our lodges, extend to our general union, embrace the management of trade, and finally swallow up the whole political power." (*Pioneer*, May 31st, 1834. Quoted from Morris, *op. cit.*, p. 103.)

In such a passage as this we can see both the essentially militant feeling of the workers and the confused utopianism of Owen in which these feelings found expression.

In October, 1833, Owen presided over a Trade Union Conference at the National Equitable Labour Exchange, at which the decision was taken to form an all-embracing trades union. This was the body which presently became known as the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union. We have already seen that a number of powerful unions had come into being—the Builders', Spinners', Potters', Clothiers', and a Union of the West Riding Woollen Workers. With the exception of the Builders' all these took part in a further conference in February, 1834, at which the G.N.C.T.U. was formally established. Of this conference *The Crisis* wrote:

"There are two Parliaments in London at present sitting; and we have no hesitation in saying that the Trades Parliament is by far the most important, and will, in the course of a year or two, be the most influential. It is much more national than the other; the constituency is much larger. The Union is composed of nearly

a million members, and universal suffrage prevails among them."

At this conference a constitution was drawn up by which every separate union became a section of the new body, retaining its own rules and organisation but uniting to form District Councils and a Grand Council for the whole country.

Even before this conference a vast recruiting drive had begun and had been accompanied by an unparalleled outbreak of strikes and lock-outs. The most famous of these, the "Derby turn-out", had begun in November, 1833, as did a strike of the Leicester hosiers. In Glasgow, builders, calico printers, engineers and cabinet makers were all involved in disputes. Soon the Grand National counted some half-million members in places as far afield as Perth, Exeter and Belfast, and including thousands of farm workers as well as a number of lodges of women, especially in the clothing industry. The Builders', not formally part of the Grand National, but equally under Owenite influence, were embarking on costly attempts to set up productive Guilds and on the building of a great Guildhall in Birmingham.

All these strikes and activities strained the tiny resources of the Grand National, and the employers and the Government, alarmed at such an outburst, with its avowed object of "bringing about a DIFFERENT ORDER OF THINGS, in which the really useful and intelligent part of society only shall have the direction of its affairs", were determined to crush it before it grew too strong. Union organisers were arrested and in many areas employers confronted their workers with "the document", which, in a typical form, would run:

"We the undersigned . . . do hereby declare that we are not in any way connected with the General Union of the Building Trades and that we do not and will not contribute to the support of such members of the said union as are or may be out of work in consequence of belonging to such a union." (Morris, *op. cit.*, p. 92.)

The presentation of "the document" almost invariably resulted in a stoppage of work.

The class character of the government was revealed most openly by the arrest of George Loveless and five other farm workers in March, 1834 at the village of Tolpuddle, Dorset, on a charge of administering illegal oaths while forming a

Union branch. Trade unionism in the villages was especially alarming to a ruling class which had not forgotten the outbreak of 1830, and at the same time, perhaps, it was felt to be sound tactics to strike at one of the weakest sectors of the working-class front. The six were given a trial at which the law was twisted to the utmost to ensure a conviction, were sentenced to transportation and shipped off to Australia with a quite indecent haste.

The case aroused a nation-wide protest, uniting every side of the movement. Petitions poured in, protest meetings were held, reaching a culmination in a vast demonstration and march from Copenhagen Fields across London to Kennington by way of Westminster, in which 100,000 people are estimated to have taken part. No clearer proof could have been given to the workers that the 'Reform' Government was no less their enemy than the Tory Governments of the past. In the end, after several years of agitation, the Tolpuddle Martyrs were pardoned and brought home.

Long before this, however, the Grand National had collapsed. The attacks of employers and Government, the inadequacy of its organisation and the confusion of its ideas combined to bring about a swift decline. Owen's dispute with the left-wing grew so bitter that he closed down the journals of the Union to prevent his opponents from stating their views. Strikes and lock-outs almost invariably ended in defeat. The Birmingham Guildhall was abandoned unfinished. Membership fell as quickly as it had grown, and when in August a delegate conference decided to dissolve the Union, it was doing little more than accept what had in fact already taken place.

It seemed a crushing defeat; yet it was the end of a phase and not the end of the movement. Trade unionism did not collapse with the Grand National. The separate unions remained, if often with diminished membership. The Potters' Union even grew stronger and was able to win an important victory in 1835. The hopes and objectives of the workers remained, they were growing more realistic, less utopian, about the way in which those hopes might be realised. Barely two years were to pass before the first signs of the Chartist movement appeared. Meanwhile there was to be yet another demonstration of the character of the Whig Government.

No one can doubt the evil effects of the old Poor Law,

especially as it had developed under the Speenhamland System of outdoor relief to supplement wages. It had reduced hundreds of thousands of workers, especially in the agricultural villages, to the position of parish serfs. It kept down wages. It often produced a servile dependence upon the poor law overseers. These, however, were not the grounds upon which it was attacked in 1834. The ruling class disliked it, first because it was expensive—the cost then running to about £7m. a year and falling with crushing severity upon the poorest parishes. Even worse, it prolonged the struggle of small-scale and domestic as against factory production and dammed the supply of cheap labour which the employers wished to see flowing into the industrial towns. It enabled hand-weavers and craftsmen to survive even when their earnings had fallen as low as five or six shillings a week and the farm labourers to live through winters of unemployment without having to leave their homes for the new towns.

To both these the New Poor Law of 1834 offered the terrible alternatives of starvation, the workhouse or the factory. It substituted for the parish a larger and more impersonal unit, the "Union", and placed the administration of relief in hands of ironically styled "Guardians of the Poor" elected entirely by the ratepayers whose one interest was to cut spending to the last possible penny. It abolished the system of outdoor relief and decreed that relief should only be given in the workhouse. These workhouses were run on the principle of "less eligibility", which meant that life there must be more wretched than anywhere outside. What this implied can be guessed from the explanations of Edwin Chadwick, a reformer without a single touch of humanity or imagination, who drafted the Act and was for years its chief administrator.

"By the workhouse system, is meant having all relief through the workhouse, making this workhouse an uninviting place of wholesome restraint, preventing its inmates from going out or receiving visitors, without a written order to that effect from one of the Overseers; disallowing beer and tobacco, and finding them work according to their ability; thus making the parish fund the last resource of a pauper, and rendering the person who administers relief the hardest taskmaster, and the worst paymaster, that the idle and dissolute can apply to." (Quoted from Hammond, *The Bleak Age*, p. 114.)

Most hated of all was the refinement of cruelty by which

families entering the workhouse were divided: men, women and children being herded into separate quarters, partly lest they should find themselves too comfortable and partly under the influence of the fashionable creed of Malthus<sup>1</sup> who had infected the rich with his terror at the rapid increase of population. Malthusianism was especially strong among the Benthamite Radicals, and their support for the Act of 1834 completed the break between them and the working-class radicals with whom they had often co-operated in the past.

The new Act was enforced first in the agricultural areas of south and east England. Here the workers were unorganised and too demoralised by long continued poverty, unemployment and repression to offer really effective resistance. There were riots in various places, in Kent, Suffolk, Bedford and elsewhere, and here and there more organised forms of resistance which linked later with the Chartist movement. More often it was a guerrilla warfare of individual stubbornness, as revealed by the vast numbers of arson cases reported during these years and the fact that Poor Law Guardians were the commonest sufferers, or that attested by the figure of 807 persons committed to the Ipswich Assizes for offences inside workhouses in East Suffolk during the years 1844-52.

One notable result of the Poor Law in the rural areas was a startling increase in the employment of women and children in gangs working on the land, a practice which led to hideous abuses and a sharp rise in the death rate of those areas where it was most common. In the Wisbech area, for example, the infantile death rate rose to nearly as high as that of Manchester.

The real battle began with the attempt to apply the Act to the North of England in 1837. The struggle against the Bastilles and the "Three Bashaws of Somerset House", as the Poor Law Commissioners were nicknamed, was carried on after the death of Cobbett (1835) under the leadership of John Fielden, Richard Oastler,<sup>2</sup> James Rayner Stephens, an expelled Methodist minister, Fergus O'Connor and many local working-class militants. They had behind them the whole industrial

<sup>1</sup> Rev. T. Malthus was author of *An Essay on Population* (1798), which put forward the view that population always outruns subsistence unless kept down by artificial checks such as war, famine and disease.

<sup>2</sup> Fielden was a radical millowner of Todmorden, Oastler, an estate manager who combined Tory and radical ideas. Both were active in the agitation for the Ten Hour Day and to limit child labour.

working class—not only the hand-loom weavers, still reckoned in 1834 to number 840,000, but also the factory operatives threatened with the workhouse during the prolonged periods of unemployment which occurred at frequent intervals. Vast crowds applauded such outbursts as that of Stephens:

“Sooner than wife and husband and father and son should be sundered and dungeoned and fed on ‘skillie’—sooner than wife or daughter should wear the prison dress—sooner than that—Newcastle ought to be, and should be, one blaze of fire with only one way to put it out, and that with the blood of all those who supported this measure.” (*Northern Star*, February 10th, 1838.)

or one in which he pointed out in detail how much more mercifully the Israelites in Egyptian bondage were treated than the people of England in their own land.

In many places there were riots and battles in the streets, workhouses were pulled down and elsewhere the Guardians were too terrified to erect them or to insist on the strict workhouse test which the Act demanded. In the end the Bastilles were built, but the resistance was successful to the extent that over a large part of the country it was never possible to enforce the Act in its full severity. In neither agriculture nor industrial districts was outdoor relief ever entirely abolished, though it was given more grudgingly and in increasingly humiliating circumstances.

Meanwhile the great slump which began in 1836, the first to be heralded by a dramatic crash in the U.S.A., continued to deepen through 1837, bringing hunger and mass unemployment to the industrial areas. Unions like the Ironfounders’ and Boilermakers’, which already paid unemployment benefit to their members, found themselves crippled by the demands made on their funds. The Potters were crushed by the defeat of a great strike in 1837. It became more and more clear that the situation demanded a new kind of movement, drawing together all the separate but related agitations—for Parliamentary Reform, against the Poor Law, for freedom of the press, for a Ten Hour Day, for trade union rights—into a great national unity with a programme upon which all could agree. It was this need, and this realisation that every isolated struggle brought the workers face to face with the state controlled by their enemies, which produced Chartism.

In the summer of 1836 the movement for parliamentary reform took a new, if apparently small, step forward with the formation by Lovett and his friends of the London Working Men's Association. Its original thirty-three members included Lovett, John Cleave, Henry Hetherington and James Watson, and in London, with its high subscription of 1s. a month and its tendency to exclusiveness, it remained a small body of active working-class politicians. But its influence was out of all proportion to its numbers and as it extended to the provinces it broadened considerably. Cleave, Henry Vincent and other "missionaries" toured the country and during 1837 more than 100 local W.M.As. were established, covering the most important towns. Quite early in 1838 there were 150, many of them with a substantial membership.

The first important step of the L.W.M.A. was the publication of the historic pamphlet, *The Rotten House of Commons*, at the end of 1836. It argued that two factors dominated Parliament, the landlord and the monied interest, both equally hostile to the working people:

"If the past struggles and contentions we have had with the monied and commercial classes to keep up our wages—our paltry means of subsistence—if the infamous Acts they have passed since they obtained a portion of political power form any criterion of their disposition to do *us* justice, little have we to expect from any accession to that power, any more than from the former tyrants we have had to contend against."

There followed a detailed analysis of the various groups in Parliament—Fundholders, Landowners, Money-makers, Nobility, Army and Navy officers, Usurers and Manufacturers—everyone, in short, except the working people. It showed that while only 839,519 of the 6,032,725 adult males in the country had votes, the constituencies were so arranged that 151,492 electors controlled a majority of the seats. All this was magnificent ammunition for agitators and soon the establishment of new radical papers, *The Northern Liberator*, *The Champion*, and above all *The Northern Star*, spread these and similar facts broadcast over the North.

On February 28th, 1837, a meeting was called at the Crown and Anchor Tavern, in the Strand, where a petition which embodied the six points which were to constitute the Charter was endorsed and received 3,000 signatures on the spot. In



May and June meetings took place between the leaders of the L.W.M.A. and a group of radical M.Ps. These were found to be lukewarm, but in the end it was agreed to draft a Bill based on the demand for the Six Points:

Universal manhood suffrage,  
Annual Parliaments,  
Vote by secret ballot,  
Payment of Members of Parliament,  
Abolition of property qualification for Members of Parliament,  
Equal electoral districts.

This draft Bill was prepared by Lovett with some help from Place, and the Charter was now in existence in everything but the name.

One more event helped to complete the formation of a national movement. In April, 1837 the Glasgow cotton spinners struck against a wage cut, and the strike was smashed by the arrest of the whole strike committee. They were charged with acts of violence and terrorism against blacklegs, and, on very dubious evidence, five men were sentenced to seven years' transportation. The whole trade union and political movement united in protest against what was felt to be no less an attack on trade unionism than the case of the Tolpuddle men four years earlier. When a Parliamentary Committee was set up in 1838 to enquire into the workings of the unions the whole movement took alarm. A "London Trade Combination Committee", with Lovett as secretary, was appointed to conduct the case for the unions, and in the end the Government felt it wiser to let the whole matter drop. But this new attack completed the education of the masses which the Tolpuddle case and the New Poor Law had begun, and brought the London leaders, for the first time, into close and effective co-operation with the men of the North.

### 3. *The Charter Launched*

Another important development requires notice. The Birmingham Political Union, which had virtually ceased to exist since the ending of the Reform Bill struggle, was revived in the spring of 1837. In and around Birmingham the class situation

was peculiar. Here the middle class was exceptionally radical, and was still not sharply marked off from the workers because of the small-scale, domestic, sub-contracting nature of production. Consequently there was a big mass movement with a working-class rank and file but a middle-class leadership. The outstanding figure at this time was Thomas Attwood, banker and M.P. for Birmingham, who wanted to make the reform movement a platform for a paper currency scheme of his own, which, as Place said, "few understood and all who did condemned".

The Birmingham radicals had, however, what Lovett and his friends never acquired, a highly-developed technique for conducting political campaigns. The large-scale petition, the delegate conference, the huge mass meeting, even on occasion the judicious riot, the whole art of creating rising interest over a long period, leading to a carefully prepared climax—in these they were expert, and, up to this time, they had been able to retain the control of the movements they had sponsored. The B.P.U. grew rapidly and in July was able to hold a meeting at which 50,000 people endorsed Attwood's currency plan and a reform programme which still fell considerably short of the full Charter demands.

Towards the end of 1837 the Union took a big step forward by bringing its political programme into line with that of the L.W.M.A. and by launching a National Petition drafted by R.K. Douglas, editor of *The Birmingham Journal*. This Petition and Lovett's draft Bill, which was finally published on May 8th, 1838, are the two documents which together form the basis for the Charter agitation in its first phase. Both were appropriately placed before the people at the storm centre of Glasgow, still seething after the Spinners' strike and the persecution of its leaders. Here 150,000 people, many of whom had marched in from the neighbouring towns and villages, cheered Attwood, James M'Nish, a leader of the Spinners' Union, and delegates from London. The Charter was on its way.

At first sight it might seem that there was little new in all this, that it was merely another programme of parliamentary reform launched by the London artisans in alliance with middle-class radicals. Yet in fact a decisive step had been taken which made the decade of Chartism a new historic epoch for the British working class. Why was this?

In the first place, the Charter was able to grip the imagination of the masses in the industrial areas as nothing had done before: when it passed from London and Birmingham to Lancashire, Yorkshire and Glasgow it was transformed and became the property not of a sect but of a whole class. A new movement with new leadership was created which swept the Charter out of the cautious hands of Lovett and Attwood and made it the rallying point for all the hopes and ambitions of the people. All saw in it the means by which their oppressions could be taken away.

"With a power over the law", wrote O'Brien, "the people may do anything that is not naturally impossible; without it they will never be able to do anything." (*Poor Man's Guardian*, November 30th, 1833.)

The Six Points became not so much an end in themselves as the key to a new life. In the words of Harney:

"We demand universal suffrage because it is our right, and not only because it is our right, but because we believe it will bring freedom to our country and happiness to our homesteads, we believe it will give us bread and beef and beer." (Quoted from Salme Dutt, *When England Arose*, p. 23.)

The whole of the working people wanted a new life: about the details of this new life there might be differences of opinion, but the Charter was a first step on which all could agree. Therefore it swept the whole working class into a unity never experienced before.

Secondly, it drew together the separate threads of agitation and discontent which already existed. It satisfied the democratic and educational aspirations of the artisan, the industrial worker fighting for a living wage, trade union rights and the ten-hour day, the hand-loom weaver fighting for the right to exist, and, most of all perhaps at that moment, it swallowed and raised to a new political level the nation-wide struggle against the hated Poor Law.

We may perhaps sum up by saying that there were at this time three main trends in the working-class movement, which united in Chartism. First there was the trade union struggle for protection of the workers on the job—for a living wage, for shorter hours, against the daily oppression of arbitrary fines and harsh factory discipline, to secure the right to legal existence

for the unions and their activities. Second, there was political radicalism, which, as we have seen, originated in the middle class but progressively acquired a new character in the hands of the workers. From 1832 this change took on a new *quality* with the growing conviction of the workers that they, as the producers of all wealth, ought to be the dominant power in society. This conviction links with the third trend, the growing ideas of socialism already referred to. The Chartist movement was never socialist in its programme, but the spread of socialist ideas among the mass of Chartists led them beyond the Six Points as an end in themselves to an understanding that they were the first step to a complete change in the course of which the workers, in control of state power, would transform society so as to satisfy all their desires.

If any one man can be regarded as most responsible for this fusion and clarification of ideas, that man was J. B. O'Brien, the "schoolmaster of Chartism". Over more than a decade, and especially in the pages of *The Poor Man's Guardian* and the *Northern Star*, he popularised ideas of socialism and class solidarity, and, whatever weaknesses he may have developed later, the value of his influence in the formative years of Chartism can hardly be overestimated.

Never before or since had the discontent of the British workers more ample justification. The development of capitalism had in these years reached the point at which the system had become unbearable, just because the level it had reached had brought all its evils to a point at which they absolutely demanded remedies which were not being applied. The new, raw factory towns had grown unplanned without the smallest provision of amenities or elementary health precautions. Water and air were equally polluted. There were no regulations governing hours or conditions in places where the improvement of machines was intensifying labour. The hundreds of thousands of hand workers in this last generation were reduced to an absolute starvation level, and their competition drove down the wages of workers in the factories. Conditions were made worse by the widespread unemployment resulting from the longest and deepest crisis which British capitalism had yet encountered. The popular phrase "the hungry forties" was no turn of speech but the expression of a grim reality.

This crisis of misery is reflected in the death rate. This had

fallen steadily from the high peak of over 33 per 1,000 about 1730 to 19.98 in 1810. But from 1810 this fall was not only checked. The death rate actually rose absolutely and in 1840 had increased once more to 20.80 per 1,000.<sup>1</sup> And, while the population had continued to grow, the rate of increase declined sharply after about 1820 and continued to decline till the 1860s.

Yet this fact of increasing misery is only part, and not the most important part, of the story. The working class in the age of Chartism not only became more conscious of its wrongs and oppressions, but of its power and of the vast potentialities of social advance which its skill and labour now made possible. The contrast between what *was* and what *might be* became clearer. The Chartist movement was the expression of this fuller consciousness and of a unity which swept the workers into a common action.

All the same, this unity must not mislead us into imagining it was yet a fully matured, completely fashioned class. It is therefore necessary at this point to make some analysis of the Chartist movement and of the main groups which composed it. Such an analysis will give us a clearer idea of its strength and weaknesses, and the reason for the conflicts which developed within it, than the traditional, but misleading, distinction so often drawn between "moral" and "physical" force Chartists.

First of all there was an important group of middle and lower middle-class radicals, looking in the traditional way for mass support for their fight within the Whig Party. The line of division was now largely based on their attitude towards the Poor Law of 1834. The Benthamite radicals led by Hume and Grote, whose main concern was to give free play for capitalism to develop unhampered by feudal survivals, supported this, and it was only the groups who opposed it who entered the Chartist movement. This group, as we have seen, was centred upon Birmingham, and quite soon, as the development of the struggle took the leadership of the Birmingham workers out of their hands, they left the movement and tended to concentrate more and more on the purely bourgeois demand for the repeal of the Corn Laws, a demand whose basis was the desire to reduce the cost of production by reducing the cost of bread.

<sup>1</sup> These overall figures show *less* than the full truth: in many parts of the country the death-rate continued to fall, but this did not counterbalance the very sharp rise in the main industrial centres.

To the left of this group were the artisans, led by Lovett, Hetherington and Cleave and others, who formed the core of the L.W.M.A. They understood that it was necessary for the workers as a class to become the leading force in the struggle but their relatively privileged position and their divorce from large-scale industry made it impossible for them to shed their legalistic outlook or to understand how to work with the less educated but practically much more militant workers of the new industrial areas. Therefore, though Chartism in its origin owed much to their clear initial lead, they became more and more a retarding influence and a cause of dissension as the movement developed, in spite of the great courage and integrity of many of them as individuals. Somewhat similar in character and outlook were many of the skilled industrial workers organised in the craft unions.

It is significant, however, that these sections provided a large part of the working-class leadership of Chartism: it was one of the weaknesses of Chartism as a whole that the more militant elements were unable to produce at this stage their own leadership at the national level, but had to rely on men like O'Connor, Drs. Taylor and McDouall, and Ernest Jones, whose outlook, though in many ways in advance of that of Lovett and his friends, was always coloured by their upper or middle-class background. This weakness, which was especially marked at moments of crisis when clear decisions were called for, appears mainly at the national level. Locally there were many outstanding working-class leaders, men like George White, a Bradford wool-comber, Benjamin Rushton of Halifax, Richard Pilling of Ashton-under-Lyne, Frank Mirfield of Barnsley or William Garrard an Ipswich carpenter. It is indeed a feature of Chartism that the quality of the local leadership was generally better than that at the top. Whatever the reasons for the ultimate defeat of Chartism, lack of fighting spirit among the masses was not one of them.

Fergus O'Connor, the outstanding individual figure of Chartism, was a living embodiment of all the contradictions within it. By origin an impoverished Irish landowner, whose past was coloured largely by the traditions of the national struggle of 1798, he came to be the spokesman of all the vast mass of desperate hand-workers who still formed a numerically important part of the working class and may be regarded as a

third section of the Chartist army. This section came into the movement principally through the Poor Law agitation, and O'Connor's paper *The Northern Star* was originally an organ of this struggle and only later of Chartism. It is significant that it was published in Leeds, since the West Riding was the great stronghold of the handweavers and the storm centre of the fight against the Poor Law.

This whole section provided a large part of the most active forces of Chartism—the thousands who took part in the vast rallies and torchlight processions of the early years. It was desperate and ready to fight, but it was a diminishing force, powerful in its misery but looking backward to a more prosperous past when hand-weavers were among the aristocracy of labour. Many could remember the earlier years—about 1800—when they had earned 20s. or more a week as compared with the 6s. or 7s. which was common in the late 1830s. They reflected in a most striking way the fact that the British working class was still a new class, still in the process of formation and still often hoping for a reversal of history by which the handworker could regain his lost prosperity. How new the working class was is shown by the fact that as late as 1851 the census figures showed that in almost all the great towns the migrants from outside still outnumbered those born there.

An important part of this group were the hundreds of thousands of the Irish immigrants. In 1841 there were 133,000 of these in Lancashire alone and between 1841 and 1851 it has been estimated that half a million more came to England and Scotland. Most of these were hand-weavers or unskilled labourers. They played a double part in the movement. On the one hand they were refugees from a hunger and misery worse than anything existing in England. For this reason they were often prepared to accept wages and conditions of life far worse than those of the native workers, who often regarded the Irish with hostility as a menace to their own standards. On the other hand they brought with them a tradition of struggle and a hatred of authority, and often took readily to trade unionism. An employer complained:

"The Irish are more disposed to turn out, to make unreasonable demands, to take offence at slight cause, and to enforce their demands by strikes or bad language." (Quoted from J. L. & B. Hammond, *The Bleak Age*, pp. 38-9.)

Ireland supplied the movement in England with such outstanding figures as Doherty, O'Brien and O'Connor, and Irish workers took a creditable part in the Chartist struggle, especially in the last phase, when branches of the Irish Confederates in England often participated as organised groups. The demand for the repeal of the Union between England and Ireland had a prominent place in the Chartist programme.

Finally there was the mass of the workers employed in factory production. This was the most advanced section, the one in which the theory and practice of the class struggle were most in accord. They formed the steadiest and most reliable part of the Chartist army. Two weaknesses must, however, be noted. The first has already been mentioned, the failure of these workers to produce their own leadership; and the second, closely related, was the gap, which was never really closed, between the political movement and the trade unions. Individual unionists might be, and usually were, Chartist supporters, but the unions as organisations held aloof under the mistaken belief that the political struggle was not their proper concern. Locally, more direct support was often given, as when the trades of Aberdeen turned out to greet O'Connor in August, 1843 "led by the United Bakers in full regalia, and dressed in suits of rich pink muslin, and wearing splendid turbans". (From MS., *Chartism in Aberdeen*.)

The miners can be regarded as a related but slightly different group. In all the mining areas Chartism met with enthusiastic support and it was among the miners that the idea of armed insurrection had the strongest roots.

From all this it can be seen that Chartism was not a simple but an extremely complex movement. The unity which made it possible was the result of a number of peculiar circumstances, and the diversity from which that unity was achieved led to serious internal conflicts and confusion. It was the passing of the unifying conditions which led to the rapid decline of the late 1840s, and which made it impossible, after 1848, to recover from a defeat which on the surface was no more complete or final than those of 1839 or 1842.

But in 1838 victory seemed close at hand and few believed that the Charter would not be won in a few months or at worst years. The Glasgow meeting of May 21st was followed by similar gatherings in all the great centres: 80,000 at Newcastle,



100,000 at Bradford, 200,000 at Birmingham. Most impressive of all was the rally at Kersal Moor, near Manchester, where some quarter of a million attended what S. Macoby calls "possibly the largest political assembly ever held in this country". It took place on a Monday and shut down all the factories in the district.

As the winter approached torch-light meetings were held in scores of towns in Lancashire and Yorkshire. At all these meetings signatures were gathered for the Petition, and delegates elected to the Convention which was to meet in London in the spring and to act as a leading and unifying body for the whole movement.

The Corresponding Act, which forbade the creation of a national organisation with local branches, made it difficult to build up a real national political party: in these circumstances the Chartist press was of the greatest importance. Of a dozen or so local papers O'Connor's *Northern Star* had by far the greatest influence, and its reports and political articles helped to bind together every corner of the country. Its circulation, which through 1838 averaged the high figure of 10,900, rose to 48,000 in the spring of 1839. At this time, as before and since, the existence of an independent workers' press was found to be an absolute condition for any advance.

As the time for the meeting of the Convention and the presentation of the Petition came nearer, the mood of the people hardened. Workers began to drill and arm, and sometimes came armed to meetings. And the leaders were faced with the question, "What must be done if, as seems probable, Parliament rejects our Petition?" Lovett and his supporters had an answer ready:

"The chief thing is organisation, payment of members' dues, part of which should be devoted to literature and lecturing, and to teach self reform as the great and only source from which can spring social and political happiness, good government, pure and virtuous institutions." (Salme Dutt, *op. cit.*, p. 34.)

The Birmingham Political Union also insisted on peaceful, legal methods but with greater emphasis on agitation of a rather demagogic character. At the extreme left was a small group who already insisted that in the end they must be prepared to win the Charter by armed insurrection. O'Connor and the

great majority of the leaders rejected all these answers but had no clear ideas of their own. Some hoped that the *threat* of revolution would be enough without the need to take any steps to make this threat a reality. Others talked of the possibility of a general strike, but, again, without any picture of where such a strike might lead or what steps were necessary to bring it about.

The result was that when the Convention actually met on February 4th at the British Hotel, Cockspur Street near Charing Cross, there were repeated discussions on these topics but no practical decision. A compromise resolution was finally passed in May which declared that the Government was arming the rich against the poor, insisted on the constitutional right of the people to arm, but placed such an emphasis on the danger of the rash or premature use of these arms that in practice the exercise of the right was hardly encouraged.

The Government was less hesitant. Troops were sent to Manchester, Yorkshire, Nottingham, South Wales and other storm centres. A proclamation declared that the carrying of arms was illegal, though at the same time preparations were made to enrol and arm the upper classes as special constables. A number of arrests followed, including that of Henry Vincent, a prominent member of the Convention who was carrying out a vigorous agitation in South Wales and the West Country. The Convention felt itself threatened, and, after the petition, with its 1,250,000 signatures, had been presented on May 7th, decided to move to Birmingham where it would be in closer touch with the heart of the movement. It received a tumultuous welcome from the Birmingham workers. Already Attwood and other right-wing delegates had left the Convention and had been replaced by men of a more determined character. Preparations were made for a number of simultaneous meetings at Whitsun to remind the Government that the Petition had the full support of the people. Delegates returned to their areas to make preparations for these, and the Convention was adjourned till July 1st.

Its reassembly was marked by almost continuous mass meetings in Birmingham's Bull Ring, and on July 4th one of these was savagely dispersed by police specially imported from London, backed by troops. McDouall and Taylor, who were present at the meeting, were arrested, and the publication of a strongly-worded protest from the Convention was followed by

the arrest of Lovett and Collins. On July 12th Parliament rejected the Petition by 235 votes to forty-six, and on July 15th the provocative behaviour of the police led to a riot in Birmingham in which shops and warehouses were set on fire: at the time it was particularly noted that though there was considerable destruction there was no looting.

These events produced a general ferment, reports of arming and drilling multiplied. On the church door at Ashton-under-Lyne this placard voiced the popular feeling:

"Men of Ashton, Universal Bread or Universal Blood, prepare your Dagger Torch and Guns, your Pikes and congreve matches and all march on for Bread or blood, for life or death. Remember the cry for bread of 1,280,000 was called a ridiculous piece of machinery. O ye tyrants, think you that your Mills will stand?" (Quoted from M. Hovell, *The Chartist Movement*, p. 158.)

A similar resolution is disclosed in the report, slightly earlier, sent by a Chartist missionary, John Richards, from the Potteries:

"At Leek I found the workmen reduced to the lowest degree possible for human nature to endure. Many were the men who publicly stated that with fifteen hours labour per Day the Utmost they could earn was from 7 to 8 Shillings per Week. . . . Shall impress on them the motto Peace Law Order, but I fear all will be of no avail, this being the Language used in those places. . . . Better to die by the sword than Perish with Hunger." (Hovell, *op. cit.*, p. 131.)

On July 16th the Convention at a poorly-attended meeting decided to call for a general strike on August 12th. But nothing was done to make this decision effective and there seems to have been no contact between the Convention and the unions, without whose backing such a strike would have been impossible. On July 22nd the decision was reversed and a call was made for token strikes "of two or three days, in order to devote the whole of that time to solemn processions and meetings". This met with a good response in many parts of Lancashire and Yorkshire, and especially in Durham, where many miners ceased work.

Nevertheless the Government was encouraged by this retreat as a confession of weakness, and in August began wholesale

arrests. Very soon scores of Chartists were in prison, including many of the leaders. In face of this attack the Convention had no leadership to offer and dissolved on September 12th without taking any further decisions. Chartism was not destroyed by this repression and this retreat, but it was driven underground, and secret committees now began preparations for an armed rising. We enter here upon the most obscure part of the Chartist story: those who knew the facts never spoke and all the published contemporary accounts are full of contradictions and improbabilities.

Yet it seems probable that plans were being made for a concerted rising towards the end of 1839, with active centres in Bradford, South Wales, Birmingham and perhaps elsewhere. Only in Wales did these plans come to a head. Here, on November 3rd, some thousands of miners from the Monmouth valleys marched into Newport, hoping to seize the town by a surprise night attack. Rain and darkness delayed the marching columns, and when they reached Newport in the first light they were themselves surprised by a deadly fire from troops sheltered in the Westgate Hotel. For about twenty minutes they tried to storm the Hotel, and did not break till fourteen were killed and fifty more wounded. In the next few days 125 were arrested, including their leader John Frost, a prominent local figure who had been Mayor of Newport.

It is probable that a success at Newport would have been the signal for a general rising in South Wales and perhaps elsewhere: one witness at Frost's trial said that Frost had declared that:

"he would blow down the bridge and stop the Welsh mail from proceeding to Birmingham. He said the delegates were then to be in waiting an hour and a half after time, and if the mail did not arrive by that time, they would attack Birmingham and from there spread all through the North of England." (Morris, *op. cit.*, p. 158.)

After November 3rd there is evidence that plans for revolt continued in a number of places, but they were unco-ordinated and came to nothing, though in Sheffield there was an attack on the police on January 11th, and at the same time there was a plan for a rising in Bradford, the leaders of which were betrayed into the hands of the authorities by a spy. By this time

police agents were very active within the movement and their denunciations led to many arrests. By the spring nearly 500 leading Chartists were in prison, including O'Connor, O'Brien, Lovett, Stephens, Benbow, Roberts, and Vincent.

The considerable Chartist activity which continued for several months after the Newport rising centred around the defence of these prisoners, and especially of Frost and other Newport leaders who were facing a charge of treason. A Defence Fund was set going, and when Frost, Zephaniah Williams and William Jones were condemned to death, hundreds of thousands signed petitions of protest. So strong was the feeling that the Government was glad to find a technical excuse for commuting the death sentences to transportation. After this the agitation subsided. As 1840 proceeded the triumph of reaction seemed complete: most of the leaders were in prison, many of the Chartist papers, though not *The Northern Star*, ceased to appear. It looked as if Chartism was finished.

#### 4. *Revival and Decline of Chartism*

During 1840 a good deal of hard thinking was done by Chartists, in and out of prison. The result was a conviction that what was needed was a stronger organisation with a centralised leadership and closer unity with the trade union movement. Chartism as it began to revive at the end of the year had a more definitely working-class character. The middle-class radicals of Birmingham had departed and after their imprisonment Lovett and Collins, with most of the old figures of the L.W.M.A. also withdrew to concentrate on largely abortive educational projects.

The main result of all the new thinking was the formation of the National Charter Association, which can fairly claim to be the first true working-class Party.

"The basis of the Association", Gammage wrote in his *History of the Chartist Movement*, "was of course the People's Charter; and it was agreed that none but peaceful and constitutional means should be employed for gaining that object. All persons might be admitted as members on declaring that they agreed with the principles of the association, and taking out a card of membership, to be renewed quarterly, for which card they should be charged twopence. Where practicable the members were to be divided into classes of ten, and a leader appointed to each class

by the Executive. The latter was to be composed of seven persons, including a secretary and a treasurer. . . . The Executive, as well as the General Council, were to be elected annually—the former by a majority of the members throughout the country.” (p. 197.)

The Constitution of the Association had to be carefully framed to evade the provisions of the laws against Corresponding Societies, but in spite of this it made steady progress. By the end of 1841 it had 282 Branches and in the next year claimed a membership of nearly 50,000. It is not clear, however, how regularly all these paid the weekly subscription of a penny. The effect of such an organisation can be seen from the fact that the Second National Petition secured 3,315,752 signatures. Earlier, in May, 1841, over two million signed a petition for the release of Frost.

The attempt to turn Chartism towards the unions was less successful, though Dr. McDouall seems to have been trying seriously to build Chartist groups within them at about this time. Some attention was also paid to election policy. There were very few places where Chartist candidates could have any hope of success, with the restricted franchise, nor could they afford to contest elections on a large scale. They did, however, try to make use of the practice by which candidates first offered themselves to the public on the hustings and a vote was taken by a show of hands. Here Chartists could often count on a victory, and the suggestion was made that if this policy were everywhere adopted a Parliament truly representative of the people might be secured. This line was never consistently carried out, but once more it is striking to see how this conception of an alternative People's Parliament constantly recurs throughout this period.

The Chartists, quite correctly, saw the Parliament at Westminster as a class Parliament, elected by and acting for a tiny minority in the nation. They hoped to elect a Parliament which would have a far higher moral standing as the elected body chosen, if not by strictly legal form, by the vast majority of the people. This, they hoped, would sit independently, and its character would give it such authority that it would supercede the Parliament of the rich. The scheme remained a dream because they never faced the fact that such a Parliament would still have to enforce its authority, and this could only be done if it were the weapon of a revolutionary movement of sufficient

strength and determination. As it was, it was rather an attempt to find a way round the problem of seizing power than of solving it.

During 1841 the prisoners were released one by one and the Chartist revival gathered force. New papers were started, Chartist lecturers went from town to town and began to draw increasing audiences. A struggle was conducted against the middle-class Anti-Corn Law League, which was trying to catch the workers by the promise of cheap food. It became a recognised practice for Chartists to attend the meetings of the League, and, when resolutions demanding the repeal of the Corn Laws were moved, to move amendments in favour of the Charter. Often the Chartists were able to capture the League Meetings and expose the hypocrisy of employers who posed as the friends of the workers at the time when they were busy cutting wages and maintaining excessive hours.

On August 30th, 1841, O'Connor was released from York Gaol and began a campaign for the Second Petition. With the consolidation of the movement and the desertion of a number of the former leaders, O'Connor became beyond question the outstanding Chartist figure. This made for a unity and centralisation which had formerly been lacking, and though there were still internal disputes they did not have the same disruptive effect as before. But while O'Connor, with his immense energy and force of character was without rival as an agitator, he lacked just those qualities which were needed to build and lead a Party. He was vain and domineering, and, much more important, he had no consistent political theory and little understanding of the changes which the Industrial Revolution had produced in Britain. He tended, therefore, to appeal to the less developed workers, to those who still looked backward. He idealised the peasant, and the kind of society for which he hoped was one mainly composed of peasant proprietors. In this he certainly agreed with many thousands of Chartists who had only recently left the land for industry, and often looked back to a village life without its real background of hunger and exploitation. With such an outlook he was ill-equipped to give the leadership required in a crisis. This had, indeed, been shown in 1839.

But he was more at home in such an agitation as that leading to the Petition of 1842. This Petition was much more outspoken than the Birmingham document of 1838: its appeal

was direct to the workers and it voiced their grievances alone. After referring to the Poor Law, the sums spent to maintain the Queen and the Royal Family, the arrest and ill-treatment of the Chartist prisoners, the Petition continues:

"Your petitioners complain that the hours of labour, particularly of the factory workers, are protracted beyond the limits of human endurance, and that the wages earned, after unnatural application to toil in heated and unhealthy workshops, are inadequate to sustain the bodily health, and supply those comforts which are so imperative after an excessive waste of physical energy." (Quoted from M. Beer, *History of British Socialism*, vol. II, p. 132.)

In May this Petition was presented and rejected by 287 to forty-nine. The debate was notable for a speech by Macaulay which made absolutely clear, through the mouth of one of its most revered pundits, the attitude of capitalism to democracy:

"I am opposed to universal suffrage. . . . I conceive that civilisation rests on the security of property. . . . Therefore we can never, without absolute danger, entrust the supreme government of the country to any class, which would, to a moral certainty commit great and systematic inroads against the security of property. . . . The petition asks for supreme power; in every constituent body throughout the Empire capital and accumulated property is to be placed absolutely at the foot of labour. How is it possible to doubt what the result will be?" (Beer, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 135.)

The rejection of the Petition faced the Convention with the same problem which had defeated it in 1839. And again it proved incapable of coming to any useful decision. But everywhere the economic crisis which had now lasted for six years was reaching a climax. Over a million were unemployed. The hand-loom weavers and stockingers had reached a point of absolute desperation. Factory and mine owners were enforcing cut after cut in wages barely sufficient to keep the workers alive. In Lanark, where 20,000 miners struck at the beginning of August, wages had fallen from 5s. or 6s. a day to 2s. 6d. or 2s. 9d. in only five years. The secretary of a miners' union wrote in *The Northern Star* of August 13th:

"The average wages of the miners of coal and iron vary from 1s. 7½d. to 2s. 5½d. for putting out one-third more labour than they did one year ago receive 4s. per day for."



Richard Pilling, a leader of the Lancashire cotton workers, on trial for his part in the great August strikes, described in his speech from the dock the process which had reduced him to destitution. Once he had been a hand-loom weaver, but by 1830 his earnings had fallen to 6s. 6d. a week and he was driven to work in a factory. Here the process of wage-cutting continued:

"In 1840 the master manufacturers . . . gave us a notice of a reduction of one penny a cut. Some people think a penny is a small reduction, but it amounts to five week's wages in the course of a year. . . . Not content with that reduction they took off another penny a cut, besides taking 2s. off the Throstle spinners who had only 9s. a week and 1s. 6d. off the card spinners who had only 8s. a week." (Morris, *op. cit.*, p. 181.)

The last straw had been a demand for a 25 per cent. reduction, and this had produced a unanimous resolution to resist to the utmost:

"The longer and harder I have worked the poorer and poorer I have become every year, until, at last, I am nearly exhausted. If the masters had taken off another 25 per cent. I would put an end to my existence sooner than kill myself working 12 hours a day in a cotton factory, and eating potatoes and salt." (Morris, *op. cit.*, p. 183.)

So the summer of 1842 saw an outbreak of strikes absolutely unprecedented at the end of a long slump. It began in June and July among the miners and ironworkers of Stafford and Warwickshire. As one mine or iron works closed the workers marched to those in the neighbourhood and brought them out in support. The whole movement is often known as the "Plug Riots" from the common practice of knocking out the boiler plugs to ensure a stoppage. Soon the movement spread all over the northern industrial area and into Scotland and Wales. Early in August the same process began in the Lancashire cotton mills—at Stalybridge, Ashton, Hyde. On August 9th Manchester was stopped by a joint march from all the surrounding towns, on the 13th Burnley. Soon the wave swept into Yorkshire, the Potteries and other areas.

As it spread its character changed. The events of a decade had taught the workers that industrial action alone could not give them what they wanted without a political transformation

of society. At meeting after meeting resolutions were passed that "all labour should cease until the People's Charter became the law of the land". Yet in all this the leadership of the National Charter Association had no part. A conference had, by coincidence, been called in Manchester for August 12th to unveil a memorial to Hunt on the anniversary of Peterloo and to discuss various internal questions. The delegates were amazed to find the city in the grip of the strike. Hastily they revised their agenda to discuss this new situation.

At once the old hesitations were repeated. Most of the delegates welcomed the strike, but few were ready to face the fact that it could only succeed if it was the first step towards a revolution. One of these few was McDouall, who had far more experience of the trade union movement than most of his colleagues. At his suggestion the conference drew up what would have been an admirable and striking manifesto if any steps had been taken to make it effective:

"Englishmen, the blood of your brothers reddens the streets of Preston and Blackburn, and the murderers thirst for more. Be firm, be courageous, be men! . . . Our machinery is all arranged, and your cause will in three days be impelled onward by all the intellect we can summon to its aid. . . . Strengthen our hands at this crisis; support your leaders; rally round our sacred cause; and leave the decision to the God of justice and of battle."  
(Quoted from S. Macoby, *English Radicalism 1832-1852*, p. 240.)

But the conference agreed on no practical steps and dispersed leaving the strike to continue without any central leadership. To make things worse, O'Connor made a wild attack on McDouall in *The Northern Star* and condemned the strike as a device of the Anti-Corn Law League to reduce wages and divert people's minds from the Charter.

With neither leadership, organisation nor funds the strike was doomed. Yet it continued stubbornly through the best part of August and in many places well into September. Street battles and riots took place in Blackburn, Preston, Halifax, the Potteries and elsewhere. But as the workers were forced back the Government began to make wholesale arrests of those active in the movement. In all, 1,500 were arrested, and of these about 700 were brought to trial. McDouall, who was perhaps most deeply implicated and who had been badly compromised by O'Connor's attack, was forced to escape from the country.

Once more, reaction triumphed and the movement rapidly declined. The sales of its press dropped, and membership of the N.C.A. fell to 4,000. The failure in action of the Chartist leadership ended all hope of co-operation with the unions. The close of 1842 saw not, indeed, a boom but a certain easing of the slump and the unions began to turn back to their more limited concerns, becoming more and more craft conscious and less inclined to consider political matters. The crisis of 1842 was the best, the last and perhaps the only chance of victory for Chartism, and it was missed through a complete failure of leadership.

One more development of 1842 should be noted, which happened partly before and partly after the August crisis. At the end of 1841 the free-trade Quaker Joseph Sturge had formed the Complete Suffrage Union, which attempted to win back the leadership of the broad radical movement for the middle class. The Union adopted virtually the whole of the Six Points but divorced from the class character which they had assumed under Chartism. Sturge was able to win some support from a number of former Chartists, including Henry Vincent, whose imprisonment seemed to have killed the spirit which had made him one of the most effective agitators of 1838-9, and even O'Brien, who had done so much in the early years to convince the workers of the need to stand on their own feet.

Conferences held in April and December, 1842, brought about the defeat and partial isolation of the Sturgeites: the C.S.U. was unable to gain the leadership of the main body of workers and so to replace or disrupt Chartism. But it did manage to draw away a certain number, especially of the artisans and skilled workers, who still felt that it was safer and more respectable to follow the middle class than to fight as an independent force.

The defeat of 1842 and the rapid collapse of the movement turned O'Connor's thoughts in a new direction, or, rather, back to one of his old preoccupations—peasant proprietorship and the establishment of land colonies. In 1843 he launched his Land Scheme, in which the workers were invited to take shares.

Its objects, as set out in *The Northern Star*, were:

"To purchase land on which to locate its members, in order

to demonstrate to the working classes of the kingdom, firstly, the value of the land as a means of making them independent of the grinding capitalist; and, secondly, to show them the necessity of securing the speedy enactment of the People's Charter, which would further nationally what the society proposes to do sectionally; the emancipation of the enslaved and degraded working classes being the prominent object of the society."

When a sufficient sum had been accumulated ballots were held and the winners given a house and a smallholding in O'Connorville or one of the other Chartist settlements. This scheme appealed most to the handworkers and to those who had only recently entered industry. In time £80,000 was collected and several settlements started. None of them was successful, and the whole scheme was thoroughly utopian. In the middle 1840s however, it did have a certain positive value in holding the movement together through a difficult period.

When the third and final revival of Chartism began in 1847 it was in a new and fundamentally less favourable situation. The special conditions which had made it possible to unite the *whole* working class around the Charter were passing. The tendency for the skilled and organised to turn towards trade union activity of a more limited kind has already been noted, and this was helped by a victory which was, indeed, a result of the power of Chartism. The Ten Hour Act of the summer of 1847 was the outcome of a long and widespread popular agitation, but this agitation had been largely led by humanitarian Tories like Richard Oastler and Lord Shaftesbury. Its passing encouraged many workers to think that there were possibly other ways of winning their aims than that of political struggle. In the same way, and in spite of the struggle of the Chartists against the Anti-Corn Law League, many had undoubtedly been influenced by its cheap food propaganda into regarding the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 as an important concession.

And at the same time, it began to be possible for the capitalists to buy off sections of the workers by limited concessions: the long crisis of 1837-42 was the last of its kind, and a great period of capitalist expansion was just beginning, only partially interrupted by the short if sharp slump of 1847-8. The age of railway expansion was now in full swing, the dominance of factory production was firmly established and exports were

expanding rapidly. From about the middle of the 1840s there seems to have been some improvement in the wages and conditions of the skilled and organised, though not of the unskilled. And, as another side of capitalist expansion, the great mass of hand-workers who had been an important part of the Chartist army were now entering their final stage of decline in the course of which they ceased to be a significant political force.

For all these reasons the Charter ceased to represent the working class as a whole. It became the cause of the unskilled and of the militant and politically advanced minority. This is perhaps why its final decline coincided with its greatest advance towards political clarity; this minority had learnt the lessons of the preceding years but learnt them too late, when the possibility of a wide mass movement no longer existed. So the revival of 1847-8 was a revival on a narrower basis than before.

In 1845 Chartism received an important recruit in Ernest Jones. His energy and courage soon made him prominent, and he had an understanding both of the need for organisation and of Chartism as a class force which was unique among Chartist leaders. Jones and George Julian Harney were the two Chartists who came closest to Marx and Engels and absorbed most of their scientific outlook.

The revival of Chartism coincided with the general election of 1847 in which O'Connor won a seat at Nottingham to become the first and only Chartist M.P. A Chartist at Norwich came within 100 votes of beating a son of the Duke of Wellington, but Jones, Harney and others were less successful. An important result of O'Connor's election was that his fight on Irish questions in Parliament helped to bring the Chartists closer to the Irish national movement which had been reorganised on more militant lines after the death of Daniel O'Connell.

In the autumn there were large-scale strikes in Lancashire. The Irish famine, the result less of the failure of the potato crop than of the plunder of the peasants by their landlords, was reaching the proportions of a catastrophe. Unemployment was increasing. The N.C.A. began to revive and to plan a new Petition and a new Convention. It is perhaps a sign of the weakness of the movement that it had nothing to offer but a repetition of the old forms of agitation which had already twice proved inadequate.

However, the outbreak of the Revolution in France in

February, which quickly spread across Europe, gave the revival an immense impetus. In London and Glasgow there were great demonstrations of the unemployed which led to prolonged riots; the Government quickly seized the opportunity to identify Chartism with the bogey of riot and foreign revolution, working up a state of panic among the upper and middle class which even infected some sections of the workers.

In this atmosphere the campaign for the third Petition went steadily on, and it was decided to present it to Parliament on April 10th. A great meeting was called on Kennington Common, to be followed by a march to Westminster. The Government now exploited with the utmost skill the panic it and the press had helped to create. Professing to believe that a revolutionary coup was being planned, it mobilised large bodies of troops as well as thousands of special constables. With these overwhelming forces behind it, it announced that while the Kennington meeting might take place, no march to Westminster would be allowed. In face of this threat the Chartist leaders decided to call off the march as the only way of preventing a massacre. The Petition was presented by a small deputation, and, though it contained 1,975,000 signatures, this was far short of what O'Connor had claimed and the rank and file had confidently expected. The Government was in the happy position of being able to claim a victory without having had to fight a battle.

But if April 10th was a heavy defeat it was not the final defeat the bourgeois myth about Chartism makes it out to have been. The more militant leaders—Jones, Harney, Kydd, McDouall and others—were not discouraged. They drew the correct conclusion that what was needed was a firmer organisation, without which mere agitation could have little permanent effect. Through April and May almost daily meetings were being held in London, Lancashire and the West Riding, and were attracting larger and larger audiences. In Scotland the formation of a National Guard was begun. The alliance with the Irish Confederates was strengthened, and if the rising which was attempted in Ireland in the summer of 1848 had not proved abortive, it seems likely that it might have been the signal for a parallel Chartist revolt in England.

Far from being able to rest on their victory of April 10th

the Government showed increasing alarm and adopted increasingly violent methods of repression. Troops and special constables were mobilised all over the country and meetings began to be broken up with great brutality. Police agents were used on a wide scale to penetrate and disrupt the movement. There was a new wave of arrests, starting with that of Ernest Jones and others on June 6th.

In a letter written while awaiting trial Jones summarised his views about the way forward: "Let us perfect our organisation," "Endeavour to spread the movement", "Show what the Charter WILL DO—and the Charter will be won", "Above all, let them turn their attention to the trades; these men are the pith of the working classes." (J. Saville, *Ernest Jones, Chartist*, p. 106-7). These were the principles on which the militants were working to rebuild the Chartist movement. But they could not be applied with a working class already in retreat and a capitalism on the edge of a period of giant expansion.

In any case the nation-wide reign of terror that the Government had loosed was already showing results. Through June, July and August scores of arrests were taking place. The defeats of the revolutionary movements in France, Germany and Ireland had a depressing effect, as did the suspicion created by the activities of police spies. Kydd wrote on August 5th:

"Fellow Countrymen—The reign of terror progresses, and grows more searching and dreadful. . . . So close has our political atmosphere become, that we are almost suffocated. So crowded are rumours following in quick uncertainty; so fearful the thrilling doubts and stifled fears of every man we meet, that it requires courage even to think steadily and boldness and nerve to direct order from this motley chaos." (*Northern Star*, August 5th, 1848.)

By September the movement was clearly broken: the best leaders were in prison, the rank and file disorganised and uncertain. Chartism was not yet dead, and subsequent years held developments which left a permanent mark on the whole working-class movement, but these can best be discussed in a later chapter. It is true, however, that after 1848 Chartism never again appeared as a great national force.

On the face of it the story of Chartism reads like one of total failure. But this is very far from being the truth. The Six Points were not won, but the agitation played an indispensable part

in securing valuable concessions such as the Ten Hour Act, the Mines Act of 1842 and the Factory Act of 1844. As Engels wrote later:

"The working class of Great Britain for years fought ardently and even violently for the People's Charter . . . it was defeated, but the struggle had made such an impression upon the victorious middle class that this class, since then, was only too glad to buy a prolonged armistice at the price of ever-repeated concessions to the working people." (*The British Labour Movement*, p. 19.)

More important still, Chartism was the first example not only in Britain but anywhere in the world of a truly national political movement of the working class. In it were developed all the tactics and methods of struggle, a wealth of practical and theoretical understanding which did not end in 1848 but was handed on and became part of the experience of the international working-class movement. Marx and Engels, who were in England during much of this time, not only helped the Chartists with advice and information but learnt from them: the experiences of the struggle for the Charter had a big share in the formation of the doctrines of scientific socialism.

It was not only the lessons of Chartism which survived. The thousands of active chartists did not suddenly cease to be active or abandon their ideas in 1848.<sup>1</sup> Wherever in the next fifteen or twenty years we find any sort of working-class activity, trade union, co-operative, political, we can be pretty certain that former Chartists are involved, working in different ways but seldom without the fundamental conception of Chartism—the belief that *democracy means the rule of the working people*. This belief, first clearly placed before the masses in the years between 1832 and 1848, was never entirely lost but has been passed down from Chartism to our own movement of to-day.

Chartism did not *at this time* win its Six Points. But historically, it was of greater importance: it was the expression of the first *independent* political struggle waged by the working class anywhere in the world, and in the history of our class it stands out as a formative as well as an heroic chapter.

<sup>1</sup> But thousands emigrated to America, Australia and New Zealand, taking their democratic beliefs and traditions with them.



## CHAPTER III

### SEEKING NEW BEARINGS

#### 1. *The Chartist Aftermath and the New Model*

THE late 1840s are among the main turning points in the history of modern Britain. Politically they are marked by the ending of the period of intense class struggle that accompanied the rise of capitalism, a struggle that had gone on almost without interruption, in various forms, from the time of the French Revolution to that of the Chartists. Economically they are marked by the maturing and stabilisation of British capitalism and the beginning of a period of continuous expansion. Between 1848 and 1874 there were only two economic crises—in 1857 and 1866—and these were shorter and less severe than these of the thirties and early forties. In this period of stabilisation and expansion class relations and the class struggle took new and less uncompromising forms.

One of the most striking features of the mid-nineteenth century was the growing unification of capitalism by the revolution in transport. Between 1843 and 1853 the great main skeleton of the railway system was completed, linking together London and all the important industrial areas. Britain was now a single market in which the products of any area could quickly and easily reach any other. Though thousands of miles of lines were still to be constructed, those were minor lines, filling in and reinforcing the main framework. At the same time, the steamship not only improved coasting trade but made it possible for British factory goods to be sent all over the world cheaply and quickly and for food and raw materials to be imported.

A corresponding advance was being made in the banking and financial system, and important technical developments were taking place in industry, notably in the production of steel, which for the first time began to be cheap and abundant and to replace cast and wrought iron for a number of purposes. Finally, the period saw a great and continuous rise in productivity and

in exports, and the character of these exports reflects the development of industry as a whole. Cotton and woollen textiles continued to be the most important items, but between 1850 and 1872 coal exports increased in value by five times and exports of machinery four times.

These exports were helped rather than not by the fact that capitalist production was now beginning to take a firm hold in the U.S.A. and many countries of Western Europe. For in its early stages the development of capitalism abroad meant that new markets were being opened for British goods and for new kinds of goods: in the 1850s and 1860s, for example, Britain built a large part of the world's railways, and every new railway meant not only a new market for British heavy industry but the opening of fresh areas into which British consumer goods could penetrate. British employers in these years, when they wanted to cut wages or were facing demands for wage increases, liked to talk about the danger of foreign competition, but at this stage effective foreign competition hardly existed and it was not till about 1875 that the development of capitalism abroad, especially in the U.S.A. and Germany, began to offer any serious challenge to the dominating position of Britain.

For some thirty years British capitalism was in the happy position of living in a world in which an expanding market and ever-increasing profits seemed to be a law of nature, in which even the least efficient manufacturer could prosper and the more pushing and resolute prospered fabulously. In such a situation a two-sided and very effective policy towards the working class could be operated, a policy combining extreme ruthlessness with an apparent reasonableness and a willingness to make concessions.

On the one hand, as we have already seen and shall see in the course of this chapter, any sign of militancy, any demands which seemed to offer any fundamental challenge to the existing system, were savagely attacked both by the employers and their state machine. But with this went a readiness, when it was clear that the workers were determined to exert sufficient pressure, to make important concessions on non-essentials, concessions which the expanding economy made them well able to afford. We have seen how, under the pressure of Chartism, Factory Acts and the Ten Hour Act were conceded. This

process continued after 1850. Second, the skilled workers, increasingly strongly organised in powerful trade unions, were able to secure a substantial advance in real wages. And third, also by exerting heavy pressure, the workers were able to win a considerable instalment of political democracy in 1867 and to secure for their unions a firm and recognised status within the framework of bourgeois society.

It must be emphasised, however, first that these gains were never won without considerable struggles, and second that most of them benefited mainly the most skilled and best organised.

Consequently we must distinguish rather sharply between the outlook and fortunes of the skilled and unskilled workers during this period. The former undoubtedly improved their position. Their real wages increased appreciably, their working day tended to become shorter and working conditions better, and, after a series of hard-fought battles, their unions won a definite and recognised place within the social structure. For the unskilled there is less direct evidence, but what there is suggests that their real wages and working conditions remained virtually unchanged, and the same is true of the standards of housing and sanitation in the industrial towns. Which is in fact saying that they remained hideously bad. But it is also true that the number and proportion of the skilled and semi-skilled was increasing and that employment was more regular: unemployment continued to exist, but in the expanding economy of the 1850s and 1860s it had not the widespread and prolonged character of the preceding decades. It has been estimated also, that some 3,000,000 people emigrated, mainly to the U.S.A. and what are now known as the Dominions, between the years 1852 and 1868.

For all these reasons the outlook of the workers changed considerably. For many there *seemed* at least to be another, an individual way out of their sufferings, by emigration, by cautious steps up the social ladder, by organisation to secure strictly limited objectives. So that if it is true, as S. Macoby says, that after 1848,

“Working-class opinion on fundamentals did not, however, change. On suffrage matters it remained Chartist, on economic and community organisation Socialist, and on matters of belief largely indifferent or infidel.” (Macoby, *op. cit.*, p. 297.)

these opinions began to be held with a difference. They became rather generalised aspirations, not, as in the age of Chartism, issues on which millions were prepared to join battle.

Under all these conditions Chartism, though it remained an important force for a decade after 1848, was a steadily diminishing force. All the same the Chartist tradition persisted, to serve as a vital link between the great struggles of the 1840s and the later development of socialism under the influence of Marxism. Without the heroic efforts of Ernest Jones and others during this decade it is very doubtful if the First International would have been possible in 1864.

Jones was released from prison in July, 1850, and began at once to take up the threads of agitation. At a Chartist Convention which was held in London on March 31st, 1851, a new Programme, summed up by the slogan "The Charter and Something More" was adopted, a Programme which contains in essence many of the features of the programme of a modern socialist party. It included land nationalisation, the principle of the right to work or full maintenance, the "rapid abrogation of wage-slavery, and the development of the co-operative principle" and measures for the democratisation of the armed forces.

Yet even this Programme failed to make Chartism once more a great mass movement. *The Northern Star* ceased publication in 1852, and Jones' weekly, *The People's Paper* (1852-58), though brilliantly edited and marking a great theoretical advance on any previous working-class journal, never had a circulation of much more than 3,000. Chartism failed to make any impression on the organised workers, and, consequently, though it still had a considerable generalised influence, and could mobilise support around particular issues of immediate interest, the Chartist Association, despite fluctuation, continued to decline.

A striking example both of possibilities and limits was in 1853, when the Chartists helped to mobilise nation-wide help for the Preston weavers who were striking for an increase in wages, but failed completely in an ambitious attempt to build up a Labour Parliament out of the struggle. Their biggest achievements were in the field of internationalism, where Chartist initiative often led to big and representative meetings in support of Polish, Italian or other liberation struggles.

But perhaps the most remarkable episode of all was the London riots of 1855 against a Government Bill to prohibit Sunday Trading. This was of vital importance to hundreds of thousands whose long working hours left them no other free time. The Chartists were quick to seize the opportunity with posters all over London.

“‘*New Sunday Bill*’ prohibiting newspapers, shaving, smoking, eating and drinking and all kinds of nourishment, both corporal and spiritual, which the *poor people* still enjoy at the present time. An *open-air meeting* of artisans, workers and ‘*the lower orders*’ generally of the capital will take place in Hyde Park on Sunday afternoon to see how religiously the aristocracy is observing the Sabbath and how anxious it is not to employ its servants and horses on that day, as Lord Grosvenor [the introducer of the Bill] said in his speech. The meeting is called for three o’clock on the right bank of the Serpentine, on the side towards Kensington Gardens. Come and bring your wives and children in order that they may profit by the example their ‘*bettors*’ set them!” (Quoted from *Marx and Engels on Britain*, p. 416.)

Huge crowds—Marx, who was there, estimated them at 200,000—gathered in spite of the efforts of the police to disperse them, and the hundreds of carriages driving in the Park had to run the gauntlet of jeers and biting Cockney wit. Next Sunday the same thing happened, and after the Park had been occupied in this way by the “lower orders” for four weeks in succession the Government was forced to withdraw its Bill. The whole episode may be small in itself, but nothing shows more clearly how deep and instinctive was the class feeling of the London workers at this time.

Yet Chartism was no longer the main stream for working-class activities, and as the 1850s drew to a close the movement faded away, so gradually that it is impossible to give its passing a precise date. An old Chartist militant wrote to Ernest Jones in October 1859:

“I am sorry to inform you that there is no Chartist organisation in Halifax nor in any of the numerous villages surrounding it. . . . Many of those that were once active Chartists have emigrated. And others, though residing here as usual, have become so thoroughly disgusted at the indifference and utter inattention of the multitude to their best interests that they are resolved to make no more sacrifices in a public cause.” (J. Saville, *op. cit.*, p. 74.)

And Halifax was one of the last of the Chartist strongholds. For the unskilled it was only in such occasional gala days as the Hyde Park Sunday that their discontent could find expression. For the skilled, other roads were opening out, above all in the trade union field.

The small, local craft clubs and the large, militant but unstable industrial unions of the earlier period were giving place to solid craft unions often on a national basis, bodies that were highly exclusive, financially solid and strongly centralised, with a permanent staff of full-time officials and a quite new political and social outlook.

As we have seen, these developments were taking place even before 1848. A Potters' Union was established in 1843, the National Typographical Society and the United Flint Glass Makers' Society in 1845, while there were already powerful organisations of engineers, of which the Journeymen Steam-Engine Makers and Millwrights' Society and the Steam-Engine Makers' Society were the most important. The first of these had 7,000 members in 1848 and was already noted for its cautious policy and its avoidance of any kind of political entanglement. It was two leading members of this Union, William Newton and William Allen, who were mainly responsible for the formation in 1851, of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers which was to become famous as the first of what are known as the "New Model" Unions, with a constitution whose main lines were soon widely imitated.

Yet in fact Allen and Newton took this constitution almost intact from their own previously existing union, and the New Model was only the logical development of much that had been going on for a decade. What were really new were the changed economic and political conditions in which these unions were now operating.

The A.S.E. soon had a membership of 11,000, mostly in London and Lancashire, but was hardly formed before it had to fight for its very existence. A struggle which it began against excessive overtime, then as now one of the curses of the industry, led to a national lock-out in January, 1852, in which the employers seized the opportunity that seemed to offer itself of smashing this menace at the very outset. The traditional weapon of the "document" was revived,<sup>1</sup> and during March and

<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 70.

April the men were forced back to work. The Union advised them to sign the "document" and to ignore it as having been extorted under duress. The result was that though the lock-out ended in defeat the Union emerged unbroken and with a membership hardly diminished. A few years later it had risen again to 12,500 and from that time it grew steadily in numbers while its funds reached heights which no other union had ever approached.

Since the A.S.E. became a pattern which many other unions, large and small, tended to follow, we need to ask what was the character of this "New Model" and what was its philosophy?

Structurally, it was a national craft union, rigidly confined to the skilled worker within the industry who had gone through the appropriate apprenticeship. It was highly centralised, with a national office and headquarters without whose authority local branches were forbidden to call strikes or spend money in any way not specifically laid down in the Rules. It had a high contribution—often 1s. a week—and its funds were used for a number of purposes besides strike pay. There were sick benefits, funeral benefits, unemployment benefits and often emigration and travel benefits, and the head office frequently discouraged strikes because these were felt to imperil the union's financial stability.<sup>1</sup> Thus there was always a danger of the Union degenerating into a mere industrial friendly society.<sup>2</sup>

Underlying all this was the fundamental change involved in the abandonment of the outlook which had led the Grand National to declare as its objective the:

"bringing about of a DIFFERENT ORDER OF THINGS, in which the really useful and intelligent part of society only shall have the direction of its affairs."

This was replaced by the acceptance of the view that labour power was a commodity and of the conclusion which the orthodox political economists drew from this that its price was governed by the "law" of supply and demand.

"Lads unite to better your condition:  
When eggs are scarce, eggs are dear;

<sup>1</sup> Between 1851 and 1889 the A.S.E. paid out £2,987,993 on these benefits against £87,614 for strikes.

<sup>2</sup> See below, p. 125.

When men are scarce, men are dear." (Quoted from A. L. Morton, *People's History of England*, p. 442.)

as Tommy Ramsay, a leader of the Durham miners was fond of saying.

The proper object of a trade union, therefore, was not to attempt to change the social order but to limit the supply of labour. This could not, of course, be attempted for the whole working class, but only for the particular craft concerned, by restricting entry into the craft, by elaborate regulation of the kind of work which any man might undertake, by discouraging overtime, or, less successfully, by encouraging emigration. It was a result of this outlook that such strikes as did take place during the period were as often aimed at reducing hours as at increasing wages. Clearly, such unions with such an outlook were grievously limited, narrow, exclusive, with little concern for the great mass outside their own organised and privileged ranks. They wished to improve their position, but, if possible, by a passive exercise of strength and by adroit bargaining rather than through strikes. It is true, also, that these characteristics tended to become more marked as the unions grew in strength and respectability.

All the same, if strikes were avoided whenever possible, they were fought-out with a solid and dogged courage when they could not be avoided. We have seen how the A.S.E. met such a situation at its very birth, and the history of these two decades is studded with strikes and lock-outs in which the union leaders often and the rank and file constantly showed great militancy and ability to fight for what they felt to be fundamentals: the existence of their organisations and the preservation of certain standards of life.

And these trade unions did make a solid and positive contribution to the development of our movement. They brought into it a new care for detail and organisation, a businesslike sense of responsibility without which no permanent gains could be secured. They made trade unionism for the first time a normal and regular part of the daily lives of thousands of working men. The trouble was that these valuable things, instead of being the foundation-stone of a clear class policy, were often allowed to become ends in themselves. The trade union movement would never have reached the dimensions it



did reach without the unspectacular labours of these men, any more than it would have done if their methods had not later been transcended and their doctrines repudiated.

In the same sort of way the new conditions created a new kind of trade union leadership. Permanent, national unions could no longer be staffed in the old way by enthusiastic volunteers working in their spare time, or by middle-class sympathisers like Owen. Full-time officials were necessary, and these had the qualities and defects of the organisations they served. Many of them, as the Webbs say, had "a remarkable freedom from all that savoured of the tap room". Once more, while it is clear that sobriety and regular methods of work are excellent and necessary, it is also true that a gulf which had not previously existed was beginning to open between the way of life, the interests and the outlook of these officials and the members they represented. This divorce between leaders and rank and file left the former dangerously open to social and political influences from the upper and middle-class people with whom they came increasingly into contact.

Some of the most influential of these union leaders gradually formed a compact group, to which the Webbs have given the name of the Junta, though this name does not seem to have been in use at the time. It consisted of four leaders of great national unions—William Allen of the A.S.E., Robert Applegarth of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters, Daniel Guile of the Ironfounders and Edwin Coulson of the Operative Bricklayers. A fifth, George Odger, head of a small Shoemakers' Society, was important in a different way as an outstanding figure in Radical politics and Secretary of the London Trades Council from 1862 to 1872. He tended to be the spokesman for the Junta on public occasions. Other important figures in the London trade union world about this time were W. R. Cremer, George Howell and George Shipton.

While the New Model unions and the Junta became increasingly important during the 1850s and 1860s they were far from being the only active force. There were many unions, especially in the North of England, which were less highly centralised and more aggressive, retaining more of the militancy of the preceding period. These unions frequently came into conflict with the Junta, disputing its right to speak for the movement as a whole, and they found a spokesman in George

Potter, editor of the most influential Trade Union journal of the time, *The Beehive*. The weakness of these unions was that though their tactics might be more militant, their outlook did not differ in principle from that of the Junta and consequently they had no real alternative policy to offer.

A second main channel into which working-class energy was being directed was that of co-operation—also on a new model. In the early years of the nineteenth century scores of co-operative societies had been founded, as groups of workers tried to break the monopoly of the millers and provide themselves with cheap and unadulterated food. Very few of these early societies survived, and we have already seen something of the failures of attempts at co-operative production and the establishment of model communities associated with Robert Owen. Most of these early societies and ventures saw their work as the first step towards a complete transformation of society from within. Now this co-operative utopianism was replaced by a more limited aim, or rather, the utopianism was pushed away into a distant future where it was not allowed to influence immediate business policy.

The decisive step came in 1843 when the Rochdale Pioneers opened a small store on the basis of the payment of a dividend to their members proportionate to their purchases. For good or ill the “divi” became the foundation-stone of the New Model Co-operation. On this basis the Rochdale Pioneers made steady and continuous progress, their methods attracted much interest and were widely imitated. Once more alongside the great positive gains of this Co-operative Movement, it is necessary to note the other side, the diversion of energy from the politics of class struggle into a more limited field. It was for this reason that Ernest Jones and other militants are often found to be highly critical of co-operative developments.

Twenty years later there were 454 Societies in Great Britain, mostly in the North of England. Most of them counted their members in hundreds; not one had yet reached the 5,000 mark. The largest were: Halifax (4,300 members); Rochdale Pioneers (4,013); Hull (Corn Mill) (3,818); Leeds (Holbeck) (3,555) and Liverpool Provident (3,154). In 1863 the Co-operative Wholesale Society was formed to make bulk purchases of goods in a more advantageous way than was possible for small individual societies, and from that time the movement has expanded

steadily. It has had two great positive results. First, to put an end, to a very great extent, to the adulteration of the food of the workers, and anyone may see how necessary this was by turning over the pages of Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*. The second has been to train thousands of working men and some, though far too few, working women, as organisers and administrators and to demonstrate conclusively that the ability to run large-scale enterprises is not confined to the capitalist class.

A third important outlet was in the Friendly Societies whose growth reflected the improved position of the skilled workers. Small, local Friendly Societies had long existed, but the middle of the nineteenth century saw the rapid spread of the great national societies. By about 1855 the Odd Fellows claimed some 200,000 members and the Ancient Order of Foresters 100,000. By 1872 they had 436,918 and 400,217 respectively, and there were others only less powerful. All had a network of local lodges, in which thousands of workers held official positions which gave them a recognised standing and opportunities to exercise their organisational abilities.

Important as these trade union, co-operative and other developments were in themselves they led to a narrowing of activity, a limitation of outlook and a division into separate sections, each with its own special interest. The independent class politics of the Chartist years were no longer possible with a working class divided in this way and whose leaders were increasingly accepting the ideas of middle-class radicalism. International affairs, too, had for a time a dividing character, for the first time since the close of the Napoleonic War. From 1815 to 1854 the whole movement had been united in solidarity with the great European revolutionary and national liberation struggles, and in opposition to reaction, whether of Russian Tsarism or French Bonapartism.

The outbreak of the Crimean War in 1854 set a problem that could not be solved quite so simply, when Britain found herself at war with Russia and in alliance with Napoleon III. In this situation many workers were attracted by the bourgeois pacifism of Cobden and Bright, who were now the undisputed leaders of middle-class radicalism and whose opposition to war was based primarily on a conviction that it was harmful to trade and profits. And among those workers who favoured the

war on the ground that Tsarism was the butcher of Poland and Hungary and the main bulwark of European reaction, there was a further cleavage. Many were swept into support for Palmerston and the official war party, though it was clear that his war aims had nothing in common with the traditional internationalism of the working class, for the last thing Palmerston wanted was the kind of war which might draw the oppressed nations into a revolutionary struggle. Even if Palmerston was believed to have rubbed his hands privately over the way the London draymen had handled General Haynau,<sup>1</sup> this did not alter the generally reactionary character of his record at home and abroad. On these grounds Ernest Jones and the "left" argued that the war could never have the results the workers hoped for so long as it was fought under Palmerston,

"The WHISKERED WONDER of the Treasury Bench, and the last great champion of aristocratical monopoly in England." (Saville, *op. cit.*, p. 183.)

While these divided views were held, it was impossible for the workers to make themselves felt effectively as a class on the issues of the war.

Similarly, three years later, though Jones in *The People's Paper* defended the rising known to English history text-books as the Indian Mutiny by appealing to the historic internationalism of the workers:

"There ought to be but one opinion throughout Europe on the revolt of Hindostan. It is one of the most just, noble and necessary ever attempted in the history of the world. . . . Was Poland right? Then so is Hindostan. Was Hungary justified? Then so is Hindostan. Was Italy deserving of support? Then so is Hindostan. For all that Poland, Hungary or Italy sought to gain, for that the Hindu strives." (Saville, *op. cit.*, p. 219.)

many workers were deceived by the howling atrocity campaign run by Whig and Tory press alike. On this issue, it may be noted, the pacific Bright joined in the cry for the suppression of the Mutiny.

For all these reasons, though the demand for political reform never ceased to be made, it was weakened and robbed of its

<sup>1</sup> Haynau had achieved an international notoriety for his atrocities while suppressing the Hungarian revolution.

class content. The Chartists had fought for the Six Points as a means to the complete transformation of the social order. This conception had reached its highest theoretical level in the Programme of 1851. But now the social order was increasingly accepted as inevitable, and the skilled workers especially aimed rather at improving their position within it. So the Chartist tradition, never quite lost, was developed one-sidedly, and the Six Points were taken at their face value while their revolutionary implications were forgotten.

The result was seen in a negative way when Reform Bills were presented to Parliament in 1854, 1858 and 1860. All these Bills were of an extremely diluted character, which could hardly arouse any enthusiasm among the workers. The real point is that there was no mass pressure *outside* Parliament of sufficient strength to force the Whig or Tory Governments to produce serious Reform measures or to protest against their fraudulent character and get them strengthened. As a result the Government was able to claim that no substantial demand for Reform existed, and in each case the Bills were shelved.

## *2. From the Second Reform Act to the Great Depression*

The stagnation in the working-class movement was, however, more apparent than real, and in the late 1850s there were clear signs of a revival. The first stirrings took place in the industrial field. In many places the local trade clubs and societies had been accustomed to co-operate for mutual support during disputes and for other purposes, but without setting up any permanent organisations. But in 1858 the Glasgow Trades Council was established and in the next few years trades councils came into being in Sheffield, Liverpool and Edinburgh among other places. Often these councils grew directly out of some particular struggle which showed the need for a higher degree of local unity than had hitherto existed.

About 1858, too, trade unionism among the miners, which had suffered heavy defeats between 1848 and 1852, began to revive. A lock-out in Yorkshire led to the formation of a strong County Union there, which proved to be the first step towards the establishment of the Miners' National Union. Its outstanding personality was Alexander Macdonald, a miner who became a successful business man. Macdonald's combination of political

liberalism with a highly flamboyant personality and a remarkable astuteness and resolution in carrying through any union campaign to which he set himself, make him in many ways a typical trade union figure of the period. Undoubtedly he practised class-collaboration, but he certainly extracted from it the greatest amount of immediate advantage for his members. One of his first successes was in a campaign to secure the right of the miners to appoint their own checkweighmen to end the then habitual cheating by the coal-owners over the weighing of the tubs at the pithead. By 1863 the M.N.U. was firmly established, and somewhat later it, and a rival body, the Amalgamated Association of Miners, had a total membership of 200,000.

In many areas and industries the long-standing desire for a reduction of the working day took shape in nine-hour movements. A joint committee representing the main sections of the London building trades put forward demands for a reduction of  $4\frac{1}{2}$  hours a week. The employers retaliated with provocative victimisation of active trade unionists, and this led to a strike and lock-out throughout the London area. The whole weight of the organised trade union movement was thrown behind the builders on a scale that had not been seen since the Preston strike of 1853. Contributions poured in, including three sensational donations of £1,000 in successive weeks from the A.S.E. The employers once again produced the "document", but this time were unable to enforce it because of the determination of the builders and the support they received from other trades. In the end the dispute ended with a compromise, the workers having to give up their demand for shorter hours and the employers having to withdraw the "document".

The dispute had two important permanent results. A committee of the London trades had been formed to organise support for the builders, and on May 18th, 1860, after the dispute ended, it called a conference at which the decision to form the London Trades Council was made. This quickly became a body of national importance, since the Junta and many other leading trade union personalities were members. In the absence of anything corresponding to the present Trades Union Congress, the L.T.C. became a kind of semi-official body to which unions all over the country turned for help in times of crisis. To say nothing of London disputes, the L.T.C.

in its first years was able to give effective support to Nottingham lace-makers, Yorkshire and Northumberland miners, chain-makers in the Black Country, Tyneside ironworkers and Sheffield file-makers. One of its earliest and most striking successes was in 1861 when it forced the Government to withdraw soldiers whom the War Office was using to break a strike of builders employed in constructing the Chelsea Barracks.

The second result of the dispute was the formation in 1861 of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters, closely modelled after the A.S.E., which quickly became one of the richest and most powerful of the New Model Unions.

Side by side with these industrial developments was a change in the international situation: new causes roused working-class enthusiasm and ended the doubts and differences of a few years earlier. The first and perhaps the most decisive of these was the outbreak of the Civil War in the U.S.A. (1861) which divided England on class lines—for and against slavery and for and against the British aristocracy and upper bourgeoisie which hoped for the triumph of the slave-owners. Influential forces in Britain wished to intervene on behalf of the South, and, short of intervention, did all that they could to assist its cause. Connolly of the Stonemasons' Union declared at a meeting called by the London Trades Council:

"The aristocracy of this country, or a large portion of them, had prolonged the lamentable war now raging by their undisguised sympathy with the slave owners and slave dealers of the South. Had they not done so, the war would long since have terminated in favour of the North, cotton set at liberty and the slave emancipated." (Quoted from *London Trades Council, 1860-1950*, p. 29.)

The British workers, and above all, the Lancashire cotton workers, who showed a heroic determination not to be stampered into abandoning their democratic principles, even under the extreme suffering which the cotton famine—a consequence of the naval blockade by the North—inflicted on them, won a magnificent political victory over the forces of reaction. As Marx wrote in 1864, in the Inaugural Address of the International Working Men's Association:

"It is not the wisdom of the ruling classes, but the heroic resistance to their criminal folly by the working classes of England

that saved the West of Europe from plunging headlong into an infamous crusade for the perpetuation and propagation of slavery on the other side of the Atlantic." (*Founding of the First International*, p. 38.)

In 1863 the news of the Polish insurrection reawakened the traditional hatred of Tsarism, without the complications of the Crimean War: it was, indeed, striking that the very people who had been most emphatic about the moral right of the Southern States of the U.S.A. to secede from the Union were the most hostile to Polish independence, a fact not lost upon the British people. In the next year popular enthusiasm was brought to new heights by the arrival of Garibaldi in London in April, 1864. *The Beehive* wrote:

"The working men of London had organised a procession for the purpose of meeting and welcoming the liberator of Italy; but this procession, though numbering fifty thousand intelligent artisans, regularly marshalled either according to their respective trades, or under the banners of their various friendly societies, was completely swallowed up in the mighty ovation by the whole metropolitan people, and served merely as a foretaste to Garibaldi of the extraordinary testimony which was about to be given of the estimation in which his principles and services in the cause of liberty were held by the English people." (Quoted from J. B. Jefferys, *Labour's Formative Years*, p. 181.)

So great was the enthusiasm, and so clearly was it an expression of working-class democracy, that the Government insisted on Garibaldi leaving Britain before any more such demonstrations could take place.

It was in this atmosphere that the International Working Men's Association (or First International) was founded in September, 1864.

We have seen how powerful and long-standing was the tradition of international solidarity in Britain. The English Jacobins, Lovett and the Rotundists, and, above all, the Chartists, had all recognised the identity of the popular cause in all lands, and a whole series of organisations had existed to promote this object. In 1838 Harney had formed the Democratic Association. When, after a few years, this disappeared, its place was taken by the Fraternal Democrats (1845-52) in which the left-wing of the Chartists joined with political



refugees from all over Europe, and whose programme was summarised by Harney:

"We renounce, repudiate and condemn all political hereditary inequalities and distinctions of caste; we declare that the earth with all its natural productions is the common property of all; we declare that the present state of society which permits idlers and schemers to monopolise the fruits of the earth, and the productions of industry, and condemns the working class to labour for inadequate rewards, and even condemns them to social slavery, destitution and degradation is essentially unjust." (Quoted from T. Rothstein, *From Chartism to Labourism*, p. 131.)

The Fraternal Democrats were followed in turn by the "Welcome and Protest Committee" formed by Ernest Jones to protest against the visit to England of Napoleon III and to welcome one of his leading opponents, Barbès. This broadened into the International Association, which faded away in the late 1850s with the final decline of Chartism.

All these bodies played an important part in keeping the banner of internationalism flying, but between them and the I.W.M.A., for which they helped to prepare the way, there was an essential difference. All were organisations in England, and mainly in London, of small groups of Radicals with individual foreign refugees who happened to be living in this country. The I.W.M.A. was the first true International in the sense that it was composed of actually existing working-class organisations in a number of different countries. It is impossible even to hazard a guess at its membership at any time during the eight years of its effective existence, but at certain times and in certain countries it was undoubtedly substantial, and its influence was frequently out of all proportion to its numerical strength. It was for this reason that Marx, who had held aloof from the rather shadowy bodies previously existing, threw himself into the work of the International and drafted in its Inaugural Address an outline programme that set out with unprecedented clarity the road of advance for the European working-class movement. As he wrote to Engels:

"I knew that this time real 'powers' were involved, both on the London and Paris sides and therefore decided to waive my usual standing rule to decline any such invitations." (Marx-Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, 1941 ed., p. 160.)

Marx and Engels had now been living in England for a number of years, Marx in London, Engels in Manchester where his family owned a cotton mill. Here they studied English conditions and perfected their theories of scientific socialism. They were careful to keep clear of the rather futile activities with which many of the political exiles were occupied, but by quiet work and a readiness to give help where it could be most useful they had built up a respected position in the movement and helped to deepen its theoretical understanding. They made friendly contact with the Chartists and contributed to their newspapers, notably *The Northern Star* and *The People's Paper*, while their *Communist Manifesto*, that landmark in the history of socialism, was first published in an English translation by Harney in his journal *The Red Republican*. Now the International was to give them a broader field of work, and one of the main results of its formation was to extend the knowledge of Marxism from the small groups which it had so far reached to masses of workers all over western Europe.

The sections of the International were of two main types: trade unions which affiliated as organisations, and local political sections composed of individual members. The English membership was almost entirely of the former type, and a number of leading trade unionists, including Howell, Applegarth, Odger and Cremer, were members of its Executive Council. For some time *The Beehive* served as its semi-official journal. This does not mean that these Liberal trade unionists accepted the political standpoint of the International, as drafted by Marx:

"That the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves; that the struggle for the emancipation of the working classes means not a struggle for class privileges and monopolies, but for equal rights and duties, and the abolition of all class rule." (*Founding of the First International*, p. 39.)

They saw it rather as a convenient machinery for bringing trade unionists of the various countries into contact, and, perhaps most of all, for defeating the methods, to which British employers at this time were increasingly resorting, of importing foreign blacklegs to break strikes. The Third Annual Report (1867) gives an example of this:

"During the London basket-makers' dispute last winter information was received that six Belgians were at work under the railway arches in Blue Anchor Lane, Bermondsey. They were as strictly guarded against any coming into contact with the outside public as a kidnapped girl in a nunnery. By some stratagem a Flemish member of the Council succeeded in obtaining an interview, and upon being informed of the nature of their engagement the men struck work and returned home. Just as they were about to embark a steamer arrived with a fresh supply. The new arrivals were at once communicated with, and they too repudiated their engagements and returned home, promising that they would exert themselves to prevent any further supplies, which they accomplished." (Jefferys, *op. cit.*, p. 189.)

The International was able to give similar help on a considerably bigger scale in 1871 when the Tyneside engineers were engaged in their successful strike for a fifty-four hour week.

The great importance of the International was that it brought together considerable bodies of workers at many levels of political development on the basis of a struggle for fundamental democratic and trade union rights. It failed in the end because it was not possible at this date to overcome the differences which existed, or to win the English trade union leaders to an independent class outlook; but while failing it laid the indispensable basis for the working-class parties of the future.

Immediately, the International was one of the factors, with the increasing industrial activity, the need of the trade unions to safeguard and improve their legal position, and the lift given to the movement by the moral victory in connection with the American Civil War, which led to a great advance in the fight for political democracy. Members of the International played a leading part in the formation of the National Reform League in 1865 and in the whole struggle leading up to the Second Reform Act of 1867. The London Trades Council, also, threw its authority on the side of the agitation and in the struggles of 1865-7 the unions entered the political field more wholeheartedly than ever before.<sup>1</sup> The League and associated bodies soon had a great following in Lancashire, the West Riding, Tyneside and Birmingham, but above all in London,

<sup>1</sup> In the middle sixties the unions were engaged in important battles for full legal rights. This made the question of political rights an immediately practical one. See below, p. 124.

where a strong Chartist tradition had survived the Chartist organisation.

It was this clamorous popular demand which made Russell and Gladstone bring forward, in the spring of 1866, a Reform Bill which still fell far short of the demands of the League. When the defeat of the Bill, by a combination of Tories and right-wing Whigs, brought down the Government, popular indignation rose to new heights, considerably increased by the peculiarly insulting way in which the workers and their Unions had been attacked by the Whig, Robert Lowe. Huge meetings and demonstrations took place in London and the provinces, and the Reform League called an all-out rally of London workers to Hyde Park on July 23rd. The action of the Home Secretary in banning the meeting and closing the gates of the Park only made the people more determined than ever, and on July 23rd something like 200,000 people gathered outside the gates, which were locked and guarded by strong forces of police. The Reform League leaders decided to hold their meeting in Trafalgar Square, and marched off with a part of the crowd. The great bulk, however, were determined to have the Park, and remained, broke down the railings and swarmed in to hold unofficial meetings in spite of all the efforts of the police.

All through the autumn and winter the pressure was kept up, and the alarm of the authorities increased. This alarm was all the greater because of the terror which the International was beginning to create, not only in Britain, but all over Europe, and because of the clear signs that English working-class Radicals were showing an increasing desire to unite with the Irish Fenians. At the end of the American Civil War the Fenians had built up a powerful organisation in America, Ireland and Britain which was making preparations for a new rebellion to win Irish independence. As a result of all this, the Tories, who had defeated the Government over the Reform Bill, were themselves forced by the pressure from outside to introduce a Bill of their own. On the day announced for the disclosure of its terms there was a huge procession from Trafalgar Square to Islington, in which thousands of trade unionists took part with banners and slogans, led by the Farriers on horseback and including no fewer than twenty-two branches of the Operative Bricklayers' alone.

The Tory Bill proved to be an even more dubious affair than that of the Whigs, but mass pressure led to concession after concession till in the end the Act of 1867 was considerably in advance of what the Whigs had originally proposed, though its effect was still only to enfranchise the lower-middle classes and the better-off section of the workers. The Act of 1867 was undoubtedly a striking victory for working-class militancy, even if it was far from satisfying the traditional democratic demands which the workers had inherited from Chartism.

It is by comparing the struggle of 1865-7 with that of the Chartist decade that we can best understand what had taken place. On the surface it looked as if the Chartist days were back again. There were the same huge meetings, the demonstrations with thousands on the march, a real atmosphere of anger and urgency and working-class militancy. And in one respect there was an actual advance. The trade unions were taking part in the political struggle as organisations in a way they had never done before. On this analysis it might have been expected that the National Reform League would have developed quickly into a powerful working-class party. Yet by the beginning of 1869 the League was dead and left no immediate successor.

The reason, and the fundamental difference between the events of these years and those of the Chartist decade, was the absence of an independent class outlook. The Chartists had understood, though sometimes in a confused way, that the democracy for which they fought meant that the working people should be the dominant force in society. The leaders of the Reform League in the late 1860s had abandoned this idea and only felt that the workers ought to have a greater political weight within the existing structure of society. In this respect the Act of 1867, rounded off by the Ballot Act of 1872, did satisfy the immediate political aims of the skilled, who were more and more becoming a special and privileged group separated off from the rest of the workers.

And in practice the leaders of the skilled, men like Howell, Applegarth, Cremer and Odger, were now quite happy to take their place in the left of the Liberal Party, which in its turn was now prepared to make them certain concessions as a means of securing the votes of those workers who had just been enfranchised. So we find the Reform League being patronised

and financed by "progressive" capitalists like Samuel Morley the hosiery millionaire, P.A. Taylor of Courtauld's and Titus Salt the wool magnate. By their subsidies the National Reform League was kept in being for the election of 1868, in which it helped to swing thousands of working-class votes for the Liberals, and a few union leaders were permitted to contest, in the Liberal interest, seats which they stood no chance of winning.

So, although 1867 was a political victory, its effect was undone by the way in which the acceptance of capitalist ideas had already destroyed the class independence of the leaders and the extent to which the rot had spread downwards through considerable sections of the organised workers themselves. Instead of leading to new advances and a higher stage of struggle, it marked a big step on the road to class collaboration. From 1867, the highest point reached in the revival that we have noticed as beginning about 1860, a decline set in and what came to be known as the "Lib-Lab" outlook increased. The union leaders fell more and more into step not only behind the bourgeois Radicals like Bright and Morley, but behind Gladstone and the official leadership of the Liberal Party. The full effect of all this became clearly visible with the onset of the Great Depression after 1874.

The very word *democracy*, which up to this time had been an expression of the "lower orders" for the kind of society at which they aimed, became vulgarised by being accepted by all classes as a description of the kind of society which now existed. Losing its class content, it was narrowed to refer only to the possession of certain limited political rights. The principal use which the trade unions now wanted to make of those rights was to secure for their organisations a recognised and secure legal position.

One of the first objectives was a revision of the Master and Servant Law, which placed employer and worker on grossly uneven terms in the event of any breach of contract. As one of the speakers at a Trade Union Conference held in London in May, 1864 declared:

"This law was found in practice to be most oppressive, workmen being in every instance apprehended without notice, and often sent to prison before either their families or friends were aware of the proceedings against them." (Jefferys, *op. cit.*, p. 92.)

How oppressive these laws were is shown by the fact that in a single year 10,337 cases of breach of contract came before the courts. On the other hand, employers were seldom prosecuted, and, if they were, were liable only to fines and not to imprisonment. After a widespread agitation an Act was secured in 1867 which removed some of the worst injustices of these laws.

The feeling among trade unionists that they could not afford to remain outside politics was further stimulated by new developments which coincided with the Reform struggles of 1867. Early in that year the *Hornby v. Close* case showed that, contrary to what had been popularly supposed, there was no legal protection in cases where union members or officials misappropriated union funds. And it must be remembered that by this time many of the unions, by reason of their cautious financial policy and avoidance of strikes, had built up reserves on a scale hitherto unknown. An even more direct threat arose from what were described as the "Sheffield outrages". In the Sheffield metal trades there were a large number of small unions and clubs, one or two of which had traditions of rather violent direct action against blacklegs and unpopular employers. Out of a few cases of this kind the Government and Press had built up a scare which was used as an excuse for a general attack on trade unionism throughout the country. In February, 1867 Parliament set up a Royal Commission to investigate the workings of the movement.

The Junta, the London Trades Council and other union groupings replied by setting up a committee, the Conference of Amalgamated Trades, to conduct the defence and prepare evidence for the Royal Commission. Many of the union leaders were only too anxious to join the bourgeois press in condemning the Sheffield "outrages", but it is noteworthy that the most enthusiastic applause from the floor at an Exeter Hall meeting was given to Professor E. S. Beesley when he proceeded to launch a counter-attack which exposed the hypocrisy of the ruling class. Beesley, who had taken the chair at the inaugural meeting of the International, showed that those who professed to be shocked by trade union "outrages" were the very same who had applauded and defended Governor Eyre who had been responsible for a series of atrocities while suppressing a revolt in Jamaica:

"The wealthy class of this country had been called upon to express their opinion on the crimes committed by wealthy men in Jamaica just as the poorer classes were now called upon to express their opinion on the crimes committed by poor men in Sheffield. And what opinion did they express? Did they summon a meeting in Exeter Hall and proclaim aloud that they abhorred the crime, and that though they wished to protect property and wealth they repudiated such means of protecting it as Governor Eyre had adopted? Did they do so? No! but they offered him banquets; they loaded him with honours; they made his deed their own." (Jefferys, *op. cit.*, p. 102.)

The evidence given before the Royal Commission and the report it presented showed how little substance there was in the smear campaign against the unions. Nevertheless the Government introduced a Bill which, while regularising the legal position of the unions and safeguarding their funds, placed very great restrictions on picketing and other activities in connection with strikes. This aroused extensive protests, the first result of which was the division of the Bill into two parts, and the passing in 1871 of the Trade Union Act, giving an improved legal status, and the Criminal Law Amendment Act restricting picketing. For many of the leaders the gain of the first seemed to outweigh the disadvantages of the second, but the bitter resentment of the rank and file was intensified by a whole series of prosecutions and imprisonments for quite normal and peaceful strike activities, and their disgust finally led to the passing of the Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act and the Employers and Workmen Act, both in 1875, which gave a more favourable legal position than had ever before been enjoyed.

It was out of these struggles that the beginnings of the Trades Union Congress arose. The traditional and official date of 1868 for the first T.U.C. seems quite arbitrary, as this was only one of several meetings of a similar charter held in the 1860s. The move towards a national co-ordinating body did not come from the Junta, which was reasonably content with its strong position on the London Trades Council. It was rather a by-product of the antagonism between the Junta and a more militant group of northern unions which tended to co-operate with George Potter of *The Beehive*. In 1867 Potter's London Workingmen's Association called a conference which, though



boycotted by the Junta, was widely representative. This boycott was maintained till 1871. Then the Junta decided to take a hand in what was evidently a development with a future. An alliance with Alexander Macdonald of the National Miners' Union and other right-wingers among the northern Unions ousted Potter, and the reinforced Junta was able to secure control.

One important aspect of the activities of the T.U.C. was the setting up of a Parliamentary Committee, which functioned between congresses and occupied itself both with obtaining legal changes and securing the return of trade unionists to Parliament. It was this Committee which organised the opposition to the Criminal Law Amendment Act and the agitation which led to the successes of 1875. In the previous year two miners' leaders, Alexander Macdonald and Thomas Burt, became the first trade unionists to enter Parliament, but it was as Liberals and not as independent representatives of the working class.

The connection between the leaders of the trade union movement and the Liberal Party was indeed becoming increasingly close during these years. One by one, as we have seen, their political aims had been won. Now with the legal position of the Unions safeguarded and a "satisfactory" extension of the franchise, they felt that all their major objectives had been secured. During these years a great influx of new recruits and growing financial strength concealed a profound degeneration of policy as the last shreds of militancy and working-class philosophy were abandoned by the leaders.

This began earliest and was most marked in the great Amalgamated Unions which had set the pace in the 1850s. Even T. J. Dunning, the right-wing secretary of the Bookbinders, wrote in 1866:

"As a Trade Union the once powerful Amalgamated Society of Engineers is now as incapable to engage in a strike as the Hearts of Oak, the Foresters or any other extensive benefit society. . . . It formerly combined both functions, but now it possesses only one, that of a benefit society, with relief for members when out of work or travelling for employment superadded. . . . The Amalgamated Engineers, as a trade society, has ceased to exist." (Quoted from Webb, *History of Trade Unionism*, p. 321.)

This paralysis even began to lead to a reversal of the tendency

towards amalgamation, as when the Patternmakers split off from the A.S.E. in 1872 to form their own craft society.

The view that strikes were out of date and to be avoided at all costs was more and more openly stated. Allen, Secretary of the A.S.E., declared before the Royal Commission of 1867:

"We believe that all strikes are a complete waste of money, not only in relation to the workers, but also to the employers."

And in 1874 the T.U.C. awarded first prize in a competition to an essay which said:

"Strikes as a rule are a *dernier ressort*, and are more frequently discountenanced by the general secretary than approved of. Indeed it is the boast of most Trade Union secretaries that they have prevented more strikes than they have originated. This is all the more creditable because some branch or other is always urging a strike." (Jefferys, *op. cit.*, p. 42.)

The last sentence makes it clear that the centralisation and concentration of power in the head office, which had been to some extent a necessity in the period during which the national unions were being built up, had now become a deadly weakness. There was a wide gap between leaders and membership and a growing decline in inner-union democracy as the importance of the branches declined.

With the disuse of the strike weapon came the rise of arbitration, and many union leaders regarded this as a victory in itself. Macdonald said in 1875:

"Twenty-five years ago, when we proposed the adoption of the principle of arbitration, we were then laughed to scorn by the employing interests. But no movement has ever spread so rapidly or taken a deeper root than that which we then set on foot. Look at the glorious state of things in England and Wales. In Northumberland the men now meet their employers around the common board. . . . In Durhamshire a Board of Arbitration and Conciliation has also been formed; and 75,000 men repose with perfect confidence on the decisions of the Board. There are 40,000 men in Yorkshire in the same position." (Webb, *op. cit.*, p. 338.)

With arbitration went the practice of tying miners' wages to the price of coal on the sliding scale principle, and their "perfect confidence" was severely shaken in this very year

when the great coal slump began which cut the daily wages of the Northumberland miners, for example, from an average of 9s. 1½d. in 1873 to 4s. 4d. in 1880.

One result of this retreat was the abandonment of the International by the English trade unions. Under the guidance of Marx the International had advanced in the late 1860s towards becoming a real leadership for the workers of Europe, with powerful sections in a number of countries moving in the direction of the formation of working-class parties. With these developments men like Cremer, Applegarth and Odger, more and more involved in Lib-Lab political manoeuvres, had little sympathy. For them the International was mainly a form of insurance against foreign blacklegs and the expression of a traditional sentiment of international solidarity which now began to seem somewhat out of date. The crisis came with the Paris Commune of 1871. This first revolutionary government of the working people was hailed with a scream of hate by the capitalists everywhere, and the International, which stood firm in the defence of the Commune, came in for a full share of the storm. The English trade union leaders found themselves being accused of supporting foreign revolutionaries and assassins just when they most wanted to establish their respectability as followers of Gladstone and the great Liberal Party. They hurried to disavow the Commune and leave the International. The latter, faced with these desertions, increasing persecution, the destruction of its French sections at the fall of the Commune, and weakened from within by Anarchist faction work, was unable to survive. Its effective existence ended in 1872, though in form it lingered on till about 1876.

For the British working class this event had a sinister importance. For the first time in nearly a century its great and honourable tradition of solidarity had been broken. Never before had it failed to rally in support of working-class and progressive struggles in other lands. Its failure now, when the cause was peculiarly one which deserved its support, indicates more clearly than any other thing how far the rot had gone.

Yet it must be emphasised that this rot began at the top, and, though it had gone quite deep in some sections, there was still much local militancy, some positive achievements and some new developments which foreshadowed the extension of trade unionism outside the ranks of the skilled.

A prolonged Nine-Hour Day agitation among the engineers culminated in a five months strike in 1871 which ended in a complete victory and the winning of the Nine-Hour Day generally throughout the industry. It should be noted that the strike was led not by the A.S.E., but by a Nine-Hours League including unionists and non-unionists alike. This was followed by the winning of a shorter working day for many sections of the building industry.

Early in 1872 Joseph Arch started in Warwickshire a union for farm workers, which swept the country so rapidly that by the end of the year the National Agricultural Labourers' Union had nearly 100,000 members, while about 50,000 others were more loosely organised in a number of small unions which combined to form the Federal Union of Agricultural Labourers. With considerable help from many trades councils and from other unions, wage increases were won in most parts of the country, but in 1874 the Union suffered a heavy defeat in a lock-out in East Anglia and the East Midlands. The scattered and individual nature of agricultural work made victimisation especially possible and it was used with complete ruthlessness. By the end of the 1870s the Union had almost disappeared, but the new hope and confidence it had brought to the villages was never entirely destroyed.

Scarcely less exploited than the farm workers were the unskilled labourers of the towns, like the London gas stokers who in 1872 formed a union which led a strike that was followed by the arrest and prosecution of many of the strikers for breach of contract and others for criminal conspiracy. The sentences of a year's imprisonment to five of the latter roused the whole London labour movement to protest. A reduction in the sentences was won, and the episode played an important part in the campaign against the Criminal Law Amendment Act.

These and many other local struggles brought in thousands of recruits, so that the Trades Union Congress claimed in 1874 to represent 1,191,000 members as against 375,000 in 1871. Part of this increase, of course, is accounted for by the adhesion of unions not previously affiliated, but there was undoubtedly a great expansion. The coming of the Great Depression in 1874—a long period of bad trade and falling prices—exposed the limitations of these spectacular advances, and the inability of the unions, under their Liberal leadership, to work under

difficult conditions for which their whole outlook left them unprepared. Beginning with the mining and iron industries the employers began to demand sweeping wage cuts which the unions proved powerless to resist. Wholesale unemployment soon made havoc of the accumulated reserves of the powerful unions which were committed to paying unemployment benefits. Membership fell rapidly and the leaders, whose outlook depended on the possibility of bargaining for limited concessions in an expanding capitalist economy, had nothing positive to offer. It was not, as we shall see, for another decade that a new kind of unionism grew up, based on a clearer and more independent policy.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE EPOCH OF IMPERIALISM

#### 1. *The Transition to Imperialism*

THE last quarter of the nineteenth century and the opening of the twentieth form a watershed in the history of Britain and her labour movement. Indeed, the changes which took place in this period were of a magnitude and historical significance comparable with those of the Industrial Revolution, though profoundly different in nature. In the earlier period, industrial capitalism in its youthful vigour was embarking on a course of development of unprecedented scope and speed, affecting not only technique of production, but also social relations, class structure, ideas and way of life. "The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the means of production, and with them the whole relations of society", declared the *Communist Manifesto* in 1848. "Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones."

In the period to which we are now turning our attention, capitalism was moving into a phase of maturity in which the symptoms of impending decay were being revealed. Britain's world industrial monopoly, which had formed the background to developments at home earlier in the century, was now ending, and was being replaced by a new monopoly of empire and spheres of influence. At home too, the industrial structure was changing with the emergence particularly after the turn of the century of giant trusts and combines and the growing domination of finance capital.

It was in the context of these closely inter-related developments that the labour movement as we know it in the middle of the twentieth century took shape. With the further development of large-scale industry, the working class was growing in size and coherence and now began to turn again to mass industrial and political organisation and to aspirations for a socialist society. At the same time, just as imperialism temporarily saved capitalism as a whole, so also did it result in a

new lease of life for the "aristocracy of labour" which identified its interests with those of the capitalists. No true understanding of the evolution of the working class and its ideas in this period is possible which leaves out of account the context of finance capital and imperialist exploitation. This chapter, which examines some of the main features of the new period and their impact upon the working class, is an introduction to the period covered by the second part of this book (1875-1920).

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the period of Britain's undisputed economic supremacy was coming to an end and was being increasingly challenged in world markets. The whole world economy was beginning to assume its twentieth-century form on the basis of an accelerating rate of technological change taking place in many countries at the same time and bringing the entire world into the political and economic orbit of competing capitalist states. Contemporaries, if they did not understand the nature or consequences of these new factors, did recognise the speed and extent of their operation, and were fascinated and alarmed by what they saw. A contemporary American economist, (D. A. Wells, *Recent Economic Changes*, 1890 Introduction) summed up very well the main features of the new situation. Economic changes in the last quarter of the century, he said, had "unquestionably been more important and varied than during any former corresponding period in the world's history. Never had there been such an economic expansion in so short a time; yet with it came ceaseless disturbances and dislocations: the collapse of prices, the fall of profits and rates of interest, the destruction of capital by new inventions, bitter competition, international antagonisms and labour unrest." Out of these changes, said Wells, would probably come further disturbances, which to many seemed "full of menace", threatening "the whole present organisation of society and even the permanency of civilisation itself". In other words, the triumph of capitalism as the dominant economic system of the world was itself giving rise to developments which filled the capitalists with dismay.

During the period 1873-1896, British industry was brought sharply face-to-face with the consequences of the ending of its monopoly in world markets. Germany and the U.S.A. were building up their heavy industry bases at an unprecedented rate and industrialising their whole economy, and other

countries, to a lesser degree, were doing likewise. All big industrial producers sought foreign outlets to keep up prices in the home market and make a paying proposition of the heavy capital investment which they were undertaking. British industry now experienced intense competition in foreign markets which had hitherto been regarded as its exclusive preserves, and even in certain parts of the home market.

Prices tended to fall, markets became saturated, profit margins were squeezed. Severe crises occurred, particularly in heavy industry and the export trades, and periods of depression tended to be longer and more pronounced while the booms were short and less satisfactory than they had been in the preceding period. Businessmen, often rather dimly, sensed that something new was afoot, and it is largely through their complaints that the period has been dubbed "the Great Depression". They were, of course, obeying the impulses of the system of which they were a part, and the measures which they took to meet the situation—cutting prices, lowering production costs, slashing wages and intensifying competition—only brought about more surely the outcome which they feared.

One section of the British economy experienced a real and prolonged depression from which it never fully recovered: the most highly capitalised agriculture in the world, after twenty-five years of prosperity and expansion, met the full blast of competition from the newly developed agrarian regions. Cheap transport, made possible by railways and steamships, brought the products of the low cost areas—notably America, Australia and New Zealand—to the doorsteps of the British farmer, and the maintenance of free trade policy because of other considerations and interests meant that he had no defence against the catastrophic landslide of prices which ensued. Farm incomes and rents fell, and the drift of land workers into the towns intensified. For the future, Britain's supply of grain came increasingly from overseas sources, as did a growing part of the meat and dairy products required by the increasingly urban population. In the process, the wealth and influence of the landed classes were further undermined.

Capitalism on a world scale was now entering upon the stage of imperialism, which Lenin defined as capitalism at its highest stage, and equally as "moribund capitalism" (Lenin, *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, 1917). In the sixties and



seventies, there had been the "highest, furthestmost development of free competition, with monopolies as barely discernible embryos". After the crisis of 1873 came a period of cartels, which were, however, still the exception; after the boom at the end of the century and the crisis of 1900 to 1903, "cartels become one of the foundations of all economic life. Capitalism has been transformed into imperialism."

It is important to bear in mind, however, that Lenin was making a *general* analysis and definition of a new stage in capitalism as a whole, and not primarily of British capitalism. He prefaced his definition of imperialism with the qualification that such definitions are by their nature "conditional and relative" and "can never include all the connections of a fully developed phenomenon". This means that the following five points which make up Lenin's definition of imperialism must not be applied indiscriminately to the specific case of British imperialism.

The definition states that imperialism includes five essential features:

"1. The concentration of production and capital, developed to such a high stage that it has created monopolies which play a decisive role in economic life.

"2. The merging of bank capital with industrial capital and the creation on the basis of 'finance capital' of a financial oligarchy.

"3. The export of capital as distinguished from the export of commodities, becomes of particularly great importance.

"4. International monopoly combines of capitalists are formed which divide up the world.

"5. The territorial division of the world by the greatest capitalist powers is completed."

It will be noted that the first three of these points differ from the last two in that they deal with changes in the structure of capitalism in the metropolitan countries which set up the pressures which caused them to embark upon the economic penetration or political subjection of other areas referred to in the last two, which are of general application. It is the first three, therefore, which require particular attention in assessing Britain's internal economic development and world position.

While all these three features are to be seen with growing clarity in Britain's development during this period, the most marked in comparison with other advanced capitalist countries,

especially in the earlier phases of this period of transition, was the third—the developing importance of the export of capital.

This was the result of her previous evolution as a capitalist power. Down to 1914, Britain continued to occupy a unique and in some respects a dominating position in the world economy, a position which she owed to her earlier industrialisation, her maritime supremacy, the inheritance of a vast colonial empire from the mercantile phase of capitalism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and to the creation in the City of London of an unsurpassed international banking and financial mechanism. She was the largest single purchaser on world markets, and her maturity as a capitalist country meant that the British bourgeoisie had great reserves of capital at their disposal at home and overseas, drawing an immense annual income from the exploitation alike of the workers at home and the workers and peasants in the colonies.

In the period of the Great Depression, Britain, ceasing to be the industrial pacemaker, sought a solution through further intensive development of her imperial possessions and the acquisition of new investment fields overseas.

More intensive exploitation of existing colonies, particularly India, and the acquisition of new territories such as Egypt and South Africa, and new spheres of influence, for example in China, together with concentrated financial power, enabled British capitalism to wring the utmost advantage from its position in world trade. And with this policy came the advantages of control over valuable sources of raw material and food supply and exclusive or favoured markets for the products of British industry. Increased home investment, while it would have increased efficiency and lowered costs of production still further, would also have resulted in lowering the rate of profit and further saturating the market. In fact, such an alternative was not offered: it was incompatible with the maintenance of capitalism and the power of the ruling class. Imperialism was an inevitable outcome of the historical development of British capitalism. While it created new problems of terrifying magnitude, it warded off some others and was indeed a condition for the survival of British capitalism. From the late 'nineties, readjustment along imperialist lines became perceptible and yielded results. The decade or so before the war of 1914—sometimes referred to as the "Indian summer" of British

capitalism—saw several periods of boom conditions, and with them came a revival in the shaken confidence of the capitalists.

The immense advantages which, as we have seen, the British capitalists possessed at the outset of the imperialist epoch also help to account for the markedly "liberal" features of British economic and political development at home (as opposed to the colonies) in comparison with that of the imperialisms of the Continent or the U.S.A.

Britain's world position and enormous wealth made possible policies of manoeuvre and concession as distinct from the more dangerous and ultimately more expensive policies of downright repression—though, as we shall see, these were by no means unknown. The initial advantages and peculiar development of British imperialism also explain Britain's retention of free trade long after the end of her unchallenged supremacy and after her imperialist rivals had introduced protective tariffs. The great volume of her import-export trade, shipping, international financial and insurance business, and the immense flow of interest, dividends, profits and commissions derived therefrom still made free trade an imperative necessity for the British capitalists—but only so long as their leading role in international banking, investment and trade could be preserved without fundamental modification. They were divided on the question from the 'eighties, it is true, but the more influential part remained convinced until after the 1914-18 war that there was more to be lost than gained by a tariff policy. Eventually, in the 1920s, this ostensibly "liberal" policy was dropped without a qualm.

But the prosperity of the "Indian summer" was already stricken at the roots. There were two slumps in the first decade of the century and all the signs of another of even greater severity when war broke out. The national economy now depended to an unhealthy extent upon colonial tribute: foreign investment, which had grown from the mid-seventies almost entirely as the cumulative result of the continued re-investment of interest, was now running at an unprecedented rate, and largely accounted for the expansive conditions in the booms of this period. By 1914, British capitalism held some £4,000m. overseas assets, bringing in an average income of £200m. a year. On the other hand, the industrial base upon which the

well-being of the British people ultimately depended had been neglected. Many sectors of the economy were parasitic or moribund, even while rapid development continued in others.

Moreover, the partition of the world among the capitalist states had been completed. The phase of reparation was beginning, preceded by a period of growing international tension and an arms race. The price of imperialism included the increasingly heavy burden of military and naval expenditure, a stationary level of real wages—and the death and destruction of the World War.

Turning to the first two points of Lenin's definition of imperialism—the growth of monopoly and of finance capital—we find in British economic development an apparent "backwardness" in these respects, particularly in comparison with Germany and America, from which Lenin draws most of his examples. For Britain, the available evidence shows that although there were marked concentration and price-fixing policies in some sectors, competitive conditions remained prevalent over wide fields of industry. This "lag" in development arose in the main from the special features in British economic development to which reference had already been made: notably, Britain's priority in industrialisation and her actual international pre-eminence in the fields of finance and commerce.

The age of much of British industry was a factor holding back combination: it had developed under competitive conditions before the technological factors imposed a high degree of concentration and integration. Thus, in the older industries, the field was occupied by many small or medium firms, and the process by which the stronger and larger absorbed the smaller went on only slowly. The heads of these firms conserved a highly "individualist" mentality.

Thus, although the average size of the unit of control in the textile industry was growing, and, although in the 1890s some combines had been formed in the finishing stages, it still retained a broadly competitive character. Likewise, in iron and steel, despite the emergence of a few giants, the industry as a whole still bore strongly the marks of its age; the big integrated plant was rare and price-fixing agreements unstable. The coal industry continued to be characterised by an archaic dispersion of control, although there were again a few giants,

and there was nothing comparable to the German Rhenish-Westphalian Coal Syndicate; nor had the industry been brought in any marked degree under the control of the iron and steel producers.

The retention of free trade, arising out of the international orientation of the British economy, meant the possibility of competition in the home market, which in turn discouraged the establishment of monopolies and price fixing agreements or tended to make them unstable. Few industries derived their major raw materials from domestic sources, and the possibility of building up monopoly power by acquiring raw material reserves and creating concerns like Standard Oil was restricted to minor fields.

The importance of the export trade to many British industries also had the effect of slowing down concentration. This was partly because in many fields the export trade was handled by big merchant houses, not by the manufacturer. The merchants preferred to deal with many small firms, while the specialised nature of many of the foreign markets discouraged the concentration of production into a smaller number of larger units turning out standard products.

But though combination and monopoly were, for these and other reasons, growing relatively slowly in Britain, they were far from absent. In some fields, they were well-established and progressing rapidly in the years before 1914, notably in some of the newer industries, or those being transformed technically, in transport and public utilities, in armaments, shipbuilding and associated forms of heavy industry in which mammoth capital was needed. Even when conditions remained far from those of full or even partial monopoly, this period was outstanding for the emergence of large-scale enterprise, developing along new lines and often strongly influenced by German and American models; this is true of fields as various as retail trade, chemicals, rubber, tobacco, cocoa, soap and electrical goods. Attempts to form price-fixing agreements, to divide up the market among existing producers or to bring about closer co-operation short of actual amalgamation, are to be found in many fields, meeting with varying success. Where success was achieved at one stage of production, it tended to bring into being a defensive-offensive move among the competing units at another stage. On the other hand, where a "ring" or "pool"

was formed at one stage, it would be in its interests to see the firms from whom it bought, or to whom it sold, competing among themselves, and it would do its best to prevent their organisation.

Furthermore, the presence of monopoly power at certain of the key points in the economy reduced the significance of the continuance of competition elsewhere. The small men, the sub-contractors and outworkers in such huge centres as London or Birmingham, often enjoyed no more than a nominal independence. "The small artisan, the jobbing plumber or other 'builder', the Sheffield grinder or the little brassfounder in Birmingham, the homeworking tailor or cabinet maker, though surviving in great numbers, are more closely attached to the big firms of manufacturers or contractors who take their work and often stand behind them with credit." (J. A. Hobson, *Evolution of Modern Capitalism*, 1898, p. 213.) Increasingly, publicans were "tied" to brewing houses and retail shopkeepers to the manufacturers of packet goods. It was in the interest of big capital, at any rate under certain conditions, to keep in existence a host of competing satellites while funnelling for their own expansion profits which might otherwise have been used by the smaller firms for their growth and emancipation.

Thus, the general picture of the growth of monopoly in Britain is one of great complexity. Before 1914, the big concerns were certainly moving towards that "decisive role in economic life" of which Lenin spoke, but they had not achieved it everywhere and were of less relative importance than in the economies of competing imperialisms. The tempo of this growth was greatly increased by the war of 1914-18: the limitless demand for weapons, equipment and other goods gave tremendous scope for big concerns which could undertake "long runs" by mass production methods; by amalgamations and absorption of smaller rivals they grew bigger yet. An outstanding example of the growth of giant concerns was in the engineering industry, which had long been growing in size and importance: between 1913 and 1921, the share and loan capital of Vickers rose from £9,500,000 to £31m., while that of the Vickers group rose from £20m. to £53m. In 1919, a Government committee, which listed ninety-three cartels, syndicates and associations, reported an increasing tendency for the formation of trade associations and combinations to restrict competition. In the post-war years,

many outstanding examples of this tendency could be given in industries such as railways, coal, cotton, motor-cars, food and textiles.

The pace and nature of the development of techniques and structure varied widely from industry to industry, and it is therefore difficult to make completely satisfactory generalisations. But it may be said that over all in this period, machine technology assumed growing importance in three main fields:

It penetrated those wide sectors in which small-scale production and outwork had prevailed, such as boot and shoe manufacture, tailoring, furniture making, bookbinding and printing.

It went forward, though rather slowly, in the old machine industries, with, for example, the rise of stamping and pressing in brass work, and of machine moulding in iron foundries: in this field the outstanding feature was the rapid growth of engineering and the slowing of the growth of textiles, which had been the heart of the capitalist economy in the first part of the nineteenth century.

Thirdly, it was unquestionably predominant in the new range of industries which now emerged, and which, because of their newness, were characterised by a more systematic application of science to production problems: these included the production of cycles, motor-cars, aeroplanes, rubber, chemicals, electricity and its installations, armaments and a range of uniform articles for mass consumption, such as tobacco, soap and sewing cotton. It was in this third category, as we have noted, that progress towards monopoly was most rapid.

Finance capital, to which the second of Lenin's points refers, was also growing in importance; and in the period under review banking capital was gaining, for the first time in British experience, some control over industry. Financial concentration had been going forward since early in the nineteenth century, and the concentration of international financial power in the big City of London houses such as Barings or Rothschilds was in fact crucial for Britain's imperial and international role in the century before 1914.

The City was mainly interested in overseas investment, short-term financing, Government finance, railways and public utilities. The finance of British industry itself, at least until the latter part of the nineteenth century, largely by-passed the established financial and banking institutions centred in

London. It remained largely a personal matter between the wealthy industrial families and their friends and contacts. Not until the increasing scale and complexity of fixed plant and equipment began to lay a serious burden of outlay and risk upon industrial fortunes was really widespread and uninhibited use made of the facilities for raising money from the public with limited liability for the investor.

From the 'eighties and 'nineties industry moved over to the joint stock form of organisation and City financiers and underwriters took increasing interest in the possibilities offered by this type of flotation. Moreover, the company form of organisation was supremely adapted to the large-scale and monopolistic nature of growing sectors of industry and could be used to effect amalgamations and absorptions.

Thus a closer intermingling took place between the top layers of finance and industry, and the net effect was to strengthen the power of finance capital. But in Britain this feature developed more slowly than in other imperialisms. Before 1914, British industrialists resorted to the capital market and the banking system for financial support only with reluctance or under stress of necessity. A vitally important new feature had begun to emerge in British capitalism, though it assumed dominating proportions only in the years of crisis between the two World Wars.

Thus all three of the salient characteristics of imperialism which apply to metropolitan countries were developing in Britain, though at different tempos from other countries. But the growth of imperialism was a phenomenon affecting the whole world: the division of the world by the international monopoly combines and the greatest capitalist powers was completed.

The states which had developed monopoly control to an even more advanced stage, were, by their nature, increasingly driven into rivalry and conflict with Britain for control of world markets, colonies and investment fields: as an imperialist power, she was retaining her pre-eminence with increasing difficulty and after the First World War, which arose from these conflicts, the United States became the most powerful capitalist state.

At the same time, the maturity of imperialism also brought revolt on a world scale by the workers and peasants of the



oppressed countries, notably in the years 1905-6 and 1917-21, and these new movements brought inspiration and tremendous added strength to the cause of the British working class.

## 2. *Social Consequences of Imperialism*

The developing features of imperialism in this period moulded to an increasing extent Britain's internal social evolution. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, that section of the bourgeoisie which, with its ideology of Liberalism, free trade and free enterprise, and with the upper strata of the workers as its subordinate allies, had undertaken the historic task of making Britain a Liberal-capitalist democracy, was passing its zenith. The whole progress of reform since 1832—the immense expansion of the suffrage, the breaking down of the aristocratic monopoly of the civil service, higher education, the armed forces and the Church, the impregnation of the normally politically active section of the working class with Liberal ideas based upon the rightness and inevitability of capitalism—all testified to its success. But the forces of economic and social change were undermining its position at the very moment of its triumph. Social ascendancy was passing to big business and finance, and those sections of the capitalists who were not prepared to recognise the realities of the situation found themselves progressively isolated.

Politically, the change in the ruling class found its expression in the disruption of the Liberal Party, the final collapse of which was accelerated by the war of 1914-18, and in the emergence of the Conservative Party as a single ruling-class party, slowly attracting one Liberal group after another into its ranks. The Conservative Party was transformed as the old aristocracy, hard hit by the agricultural depression, tended to coalesce with the financiers and big business men, with whom it had more points of common interest than with the industrial and commercial middle class. At the same time, the Conservatives adapted themselves to the wider franchise, winning support among the lower middle and working classes by means of demagoguery and imperialist flag-waving.

An ideology of imperialism was now developed to try to justify and win popular support for the policy of acquiring and penetrating overseas areas which was now vital to the survival of the ruling class. Scientific theories, such as Darwinism, were

perverted into its service. British history was rewritten in its image. Song-writers, journalists, academics, clergy, poets joined in its eulogy. By every means, imperialism was propagated as the new British orthodoxy. Idealist phrases such as "the white man's burden", "civilising missions", "leading backward peoples towards self-government", jostled with such frank admissions as that of Joseph Chamberlain in 1895, that colonies were "estates" to be developed by the "judicious investment of British money", or that of Lord Lugard in 1893 that the "scramble for Africa" was due to the "growing commercial rivalry, which brought home to the civilised nations the vital necessity of securing the only remaining fields for industrial enterprise and expansion".

It was hoped that imperialism would smooth over class antagonisms by winning over the mass of the population to a belief in a community of interest with the ruling class in the exploitation of the Empire, by providing an "outlet" for "surplus" population and markets which would give stable employment. Cecil Rhodes said in 1895 that, after attending a meeting of the unemployed in the East End of London and listening to the "wild speeches which were just a call for 'bread, bread, bread,'" he became more than ever convinced of the importance of imperialism as a solution for "the social problem". "The Empire", he said, "is a bread and butter question. If you want to avoid civil war, you must become imperialists."

Thus imperialism, both in the sense of an economic policy and of a system of ideas, became in this period an integral part of the British social structure, which it affected throughout. The old Liberal-Radical anti-imperialism which had been the traditional policy of the industrial bourgeoisie and its working-class allies in the nineteenth century did not at once die away, but it was losing strength and was forced on the defensive: the last really serious Liberal campaign against war and imperialism was during the South African War, 1899-1902, when "jingo" attacks brought several groups of progressive opinion together for self-defence.

Now only a determined and politically conscious working class could carry on such a fight. This new anti-imperialism was developing from the 'eighties onwards, but there was no mass political movement against war and imperialism before the latter stages of the war of 1914-18, and as we shall see, even

socialist opinion was not free from imperialist ideas. Pete Curran, a militant of the Independent Labour Party, speaking at the 1900 Congress of the Second International, gave an indication of the propaganda with which the workers were deluged and how it was resisted:

"Great efforts are now being made in England", he said, "to convince the trade unionists that the colonial policy is in their interests, for it creates new markets and thereby increases the possibilities of work and raises wages. But the English trade unionists are not to be caught with those fine words; they answer: So long as there are children in England who go hungry to school, so long as there are workers who wander about in rags and die in wretchedness, the English workers have no interest in exporting to the colonies the goods they produce. And if the jingoes rejoice in the fact that England has become a great country on which the sun never sets, then I say that in England there are thousands of homes on which the sun has never risen." (Quoted by J. Lenz, *Rise and Fall of the Second International*, p. 51.)

At the same time, in other classes and sections of the population, significant changes were taking place, some of which favoured the spread of imperialist ideas.

First was a growth in numbers of the small rentiers with investments in stocks and shares. These "slaves of the City page" (which was now becoming a feature of daily journalism) identified their interests with those of the financiers and executives who held the real threads of power. In large part, too, their holdings were in overseas investment, which gave them a direct stake in the fortunes of imperialism.

Secondly, as we have noted, many of the small entrepreneurs, sub-contractors, jobbing builders and the like, had lost, or were losing, the substance of their independence. They tended to radiate around the big units and were increasingly dependent on the combines and large scale businesses which dominated the economy.

Thirdly, the increasing scale and complexity of the economic structure was bringing a considerable expansion of the salaried strata, the professions and office staffs. These now formed the larger part of what was loosely referred to as the "middle classes", though part at any rate formed merely a black-coated proletariat. Industry, commerce and finance demanded an increasing volume of paper work and a more intricate chain of

command. A growing army of clerks, bookkeepers, salesmen, agents, managers and foremen, now occupied a position of growing numerical strength in the class structure; it included, too, an increasing number of women, particularly in the lower clerical grades and in distribution. Many people in this section succumbed to the belief that clean hands and white collars set them above the workers at the bench; others, however, played an active part in the labour movement.

Finally, the working class too was profoundly affected in composition, distribution and outlook by the economic and social changes which we have reviewed. Here again, the developing trends of mechanisation and growing scale of undertakings tended to draw the working class together and break down the divisions within it: the expansion of trade union membership from less than a million at the beginning of our period to eight millions at the end of it is significant evidence of this process. The scale of the representative undertaking tended to grow, particularly in the developing sectors of industry, thus bringing increasing numbers of workers together in larger groups—the new factories employed hundreds, or even thousands, in sharp contrast with the tiny workshops which, even after the beginning of this age of mass production, were still characteristic of many sectors. A second consequence of mechanisation was that the undertaking tended to be more highly integrated, making working conditions more uniform.

Mechanisation “imposed on the production process a collective character, as the activity of a half mechanical, half-human team”. The division of labour was extended “to a degree of intricacy never previously witnessed”, and there was an increasing need for the activities of the human producer to conform to the rhythm of the machine process. This was reflected in the growing role of capital as a coercive and disciplinary force (M. Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*, 1946, p. 259). In many fields, less scope was left for the application of all-round skills acquired in the course of a long apprenticeship; there was emerging in the factories a category of worker later to be known as “semi-skilled”, a machine operator as distinct from the fully-trained craftsman. The new trends in this way tended to make many sections of the working class more like each other in skill, wages and standing, though it was not until

after 1914 that the full effects of mechanisation were felt by the "aristocracy of labour" as a whole. Until then, in the factory industries, the old basis of the "aristocracy"—the imperfection of the machines themselves—still largely continued though it was being threatened and undermined, and to some extent the machines created the need for new skills. Broadly, what was happening in the factories before 1914 was a "diminution of the lowest paid groups and an increase of the less abysmally paid." (E. J. Hobsbawm, "Labour Aristocracy in the 19th Century," article in *Democracy and the Labour Movement*, 1954.)

Manufacturing industry continued to expand in absolute terms, though employment in it grew less rapidly than in transport, distribution, service trades and the like, so that a large and perhaps increasing proportion of the working class was not employed in the factories and still worked in small-scale units and pre-industrial conditions. At least part of this type of employment arose out of the inequality of income distribution and the parasitic nature of Britain's imperialist position.

Within industry, the most rapid increases, as reflected in the employment figures, took place in mining, building, engineering and shipbuilding. In mining and building technical progress was slow, and increasing output was proportionate to the change in the labour force. The impressive expansion in employment in the engineering and shipbuilding industries and the finishing trades generally took place in spite of marked technical progress, and they repeatedly enjoyed boom conditions after the end of the Great Depression. On the other hand, in the iron and steel industry, employment grew by a smaller proportion than the population as a whole.

Of the sections of workers outside manufacture, employment in transport of all kinds—railways, docks, passenger transport in the cities, the mercantile marine—expanded rapidly. In London and other big ports and towns there was a great mass of unskilled and often casually employed labour, recruited from agriculture which in the middle of the century had employed nearly a quarter of the population, but less than a tenth at the end of it.

The working class in the period under consideration may be said to have been divided into three more or less clearly defined categories: we will now describe briefly the changes taking

place within them in consequence of the broader developments already outlined.

First was the "aristocracy of labour", the upper layer of about 15 per cent. marked by relatively high wages and regularity of employment. From the 'forties to the 'eighties, this section had roughly coincided with the membership of the trade unions.

Next came a broad stratum of rather less than half of the working class, including the ordinary skilled men, the better paid labourers and the growing body of semi-skilled emerging with the growth of mechanisation.

Thirdly was the section made up of the so-called "unskilled", labourers in a variety of industries and workers in "sweated" trades. The essence of the history of this period was the dramatic development of trade union organisation in the third category, spreading to the second and the first, and the conflict of ideas, aims and organisation between this militant "New Unionism" and the conservative "Old Unionism" of the skilled craftsmen.

From 1840 onwards, the aristocracy of labour had been reinforced by the rise of trades with a high proportion of skilled men, such as engineering, building and printing, while in the textile industries the increasing employment of women from the 'eighties gave a more distinct and dominant place to the highly skilled male workers. In the second half of the century, the centre of gravity shifted away from the old pre-industrial crafts to the metal industries and to a less extent to cotton. The wage census of 1906 (which does not include coal mining) shows that the industries with the largest aristocratic layer (20 per cent. or more) were: iron and steel, engineering and boilermaking, shipbuilding, various metal industries, cotton, building, cabinet making, printing and hosiery.

The social attitude of such workers, and consequently of their unions, was overwhelmingly conservative: they were keenly aware that they had a special position in society, and were anxious by policies of ultra-caution and respectability to retain the acceptance by the employers which they seemed to have won in the 'seventies. Their outlook was vividly illustrated by Robert Knight, general secretary of the Boilermakers' and Iron Ship Builders' Society, who told the Royal Commission on Labour in the 'nineties that there ought not to be divergences of interest between members of his union and of the Tyneside

Labour Union, "if we could only get the labourers to keep their places. . . . The plater is the mechanic, and as a matter of course, the helper ought to be subservient and do as the mechanic tells him." He agreed that the plater stood to some extent in the position of the employer of the helper, and that just as there was a cleavage of interest between the skilled workman and the employer, there was a corresponding cleavage between the unskilled and the skilled workman. There had never been a case of a man applying for membership of the society without serving years of apprenticeship. "I do not think," said Knight, "that it would be desirable for a man of one class to go to another class." (Quoted by E. J. Hobsbawm, *Labour's Turning Point*, 1948, pp. 4-5.)

Another example, taken from the cotton trade, further illustrates the relationship of the aristocrats to the rest of the workers. James Mawdsley, also a stalwart of the old school, and incidentally a Tory in politics, told the Commission that a spinner would train at least three piecers to do a spinner's work, yet there would be work for only one of them.

"The employers have a splendid selection, and they select the giants . . . in working capacity, as spinners to begin with. . . . The others, the next best, plenty of them drift into miscellaneous occupations, some go as labourers at foundries, some go out hawking, others go in for portering, others in the coal trade—it is the same as in other occupations. And then a certain porportion remain piecers all their lives with an occasional attempt at spinning in case of the sickness of the spinner." (*ibid.*, pp. 5-6.)

Thus, both because of its special position and its aspirations, the aristocracy of labour was still proving a rewarding field for policies of class collaboration. Lancashire cotton spinners and Tyneside shipyard workers invested in their respective industries, as did their trade unions. Inexpensive "profit-sharing" schemes, house purchase through building societies, and an intensification of propaganda through education and the press of the desirability of docilely sharing a small part at least of the boons of imperialism, all fostered ideas to which the aristocrats were already prone.

The Great Depression had diverse effects upon the aristocracy of labour. It brought widespread unemployment and increased irregularity of employment in many industries, and

the employers were not slow to take advantage of the changed conditions on the labour market to increase systematic overtime and intensify exploitation.

Knight, writing in the Boilermakers' Annual Report for 1886, said:

"In every shipbuilding port, there are to be seen thousands of idle men seeking vainly for an honest day's work. The privation that has been endured by them, their wives and children, is terrible to contemplate. Sickness has been very prevalent, whilst the hundreds of pinched and hungry faces told a tale of suffering and privation which no optimist could minimise or conceal." (Quoted by Webbs, *History of Trade Unionism*, 1920 edition, p. 378.)

In the same year, Mawdsley reported to the International Trades Union Congress in Paris:

"Wages have fallen, and there are a great number of unemployed. . . . Flax mills were being closed every day . . . all the building trades were in a bad position; . . . ironfoundries were in difficulties, and one third of the shipwrights were without work . . . with a very few exceptions, the depression affecting the great leading trades was felt in a thousand and one occupations." (*ibid*, p. 379.)

The weakened bargaining position of the workers was vividly exemplified in the testimony of R. Davis, of the National Union of Shop Assistants, in his evidence in the early 'nineties to the Royal Commission on Labour (Group C., Question 31,122):

"The crush for work in the ranks of the shop assistants, and in fact in every other workingclass rank, is so great that there are often men out of employment for a week or a fortnight who are glad to take employment at any price in order to get bread and cheese for himself and his wife and family."

The unions staggered and sometimes collapsed under the weight of the unemployment benefits which had to be paid out in the repeated slumps. In the depression year of 1879, for instance, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers had 13.3 per cent. of its membership unemployed; the London Society of Compositors, 14.3; the Society of Ironfounders, 22.3; and the Boilermakers and Iron Shipbuilders, 20.4.

On the other hand, the steady fall in prices which marked the last decades of the century brought real gains for those



workers who managed to keep their jobs. In addition, the wages differential which had widened in the half century from 1840 was at least maintained until the 1914 war, and a worker with a good wage of say 40s. gained far more than twice as much from each cheapening of the cost of production than a worker earning 20s. It was the upper strata of the working class which enjoyed the machine-made semi-luxury goods which fell most in price, such as watches, furniture, books and bicycles.

Here is one important reason why the "old unionism" survived the Great Depression, which so startlingly drained its resources and revealed the inadequacy of its ideas as a guide for the working class as a whole in a new phase of history. And until the 1914 war, the imperialist development which, as we have seen, brought a new lease of power and profit to British capitalism also prolonged the conditions which produced the aristocracy of labour. Industries such as engineering and ship-building once more enjoyed expansive conditions, and the wealth of the upper classes sustained the growth of small-scale service trades. It was not until after the war that the tendencies emerging in this period produced a real collapse of the labour aristocracy.

But these tendencies were already having a perceptible effect upon the weight and social status of the labour aristocracy. One of its distinguishing characteristics in the nineteenth century was its assured position in society immediately below the employers, a position which merged with that of the shopkeepers, small masters, foremen and the like. This situation explained its continuing Liberal-Radical outlook in politics and its failure to form an independent working-class party. But with the growing scale of industry, as we have noted above, new strata of managerial and "white collar" workers began to grow in size and distinctness from the manual workers, and to replace them in the position of special privilege which they had enjoyed. Here was an important factor disposing the skilled working class to turn to the idea of independent labour politics.

The relation of the skilled aristocracy to the rest of the working class was changing too. From the 'seventies there was a decline in systems of sub-contract in which a skilled man undertaking a job would be paid a price from which he in turn paid the wages of his helpers; it can easily be seen how the decay of this system weakened the bond between the labour aristocrat

and the employer. It was replaced by piecework, which maintained the differential, but broke down the former barrier which had almost amounted to one of class. The increasing use of automatic machines, giving growing opportunity for the employment of semi-skilled labour, also undermined the special position of the skilled men.

The relative significance of the old aristocracy of labour within the working class as a whole was being reduced in the period under consideration by far-reaching changes of technique and manpower distribution to which we have already referred. Notable among these were the growth of employment in industries with only a small labour aristocracy—such as mining, transport, readymade clothing and footwear, chemicals, public utilities, food, drink and tobacco; in semi-skilled factory work—such as that of the expanding Midlands engineering factories; and in entirely new grades such as those of the electricians and machine moulders. These changes affected most immediately the two lower strata of the working class.

Next to the labour aristocrats came a broad middle layer, including nearly half of the workers. Among them were the ordinary skilled, whom the aristocrats regarded as inferior, as men who, "while very honest and anxious to do well, yet from deficiency of education, and perhaps from some lack of moral strength and courage", were not "equal to the first class of men", as the secretary of the Working Jewellers' Trade Society observed in 1895. (H. Allen, evidence to the Royal Commission on the Aged Poor.) The middle stratum also included the growing body of semi-skilled in the mechanised industries and the better-paid labourers—men with special skills and strength in what were traditionally regarded as unskilled employments. The division between this stratum and that of the aristocrats tended to decline, and workers of this section also enjoyed, though to a proportionately smaller degree, the benefits of falling prices at the end of the century. In fact, one of the general tendencies of the period was the formation of an enlarged and diluted labour aristocracy, embracing the whole upper half of the working class.

The remainder of the working class, about another 40 per cent., consisted of "unskilled" workers: dockers, gas stokers, agricultural workers, building, railway and shipyard and "general" labourers, and a large proportion of the miners.

It had been thought in the heyday of the "amalgamated" unionism that organisation was impossible in most of these groups: but coherence and community of interest had been growing among great masses of workers in many industries, notably the mines, railways, docks and gas works, and once a start had been made in the late 'eighties, union organisation spread rapidly. In these key industries in the latter part of the century, labour was being recruited rapidly from the countryside, yet the incidence of unemployment and irregularity of employment in them, as in other sections in this stratum, was probably even great than in the case of the skilled trades, and, in the absence of friendly benefits, for the unskilled the only resources were often the pawnshop, debt, charity or pauperdom. It was estimated that two-thirds of this section would, mainly in old age, become paupers. There is a mountain of authoritative contemporary evidence of the appalling condition under which about 40 per cent. of the working class existed. Charles Booth, after his massive survey of London in the late 'eighties and early 'nineties, concluded that a third of the population there was on or below the harshest poverty line; in large areas of the metropolis, nearly two-thirds of the population fell into this category. Sir Henry Campbell Bannerman, the Liberal leader, noted in 1903 that there was "about 30 per cent. of our population underfed, on the verge of hunger . . . living in the grip of perpetual poverty". Sir Leo Chiozza Money, the economist, in his book *Riches and Poverty*, published in 1905, referred to the "deprivation of the many and the luxury of the few" which had "degraded our national life at both ends of the scale", with "at one end 13 million on the verge of hunger and morally deteriorated through poverty and unloveliness". Official inquiries revealed the same picture, and the publicity received by the "sweating system" in the early years of the twentieth century showed that the worst evils of industrialism were by no means extinct in the back streets of the big towns.

The powerful rebellion of this section of the workers under the leadership of militant socialists, and their formation of the "new" unions from the late 'eighties marks the beginning of a new epoch in the history of the labour movement. From them the will to recruit and struggle spread to the older unions, which now grew mightily: henceforth, the trade union movement was to be counted not in hundreds of thousands but in

millions; soon, too, it was to emerge as a major factor in the political arena.

But, as we have noted, the "old" unionists still had a powerful basis, and had been given a new lease of life in the epoch of imperialism. For decades they had monopolised the trade union movement, and with generations of experience of organisation behind them, they fought effectively for their policies based upon a desire to win acceptance by the middle class, upon preference for compromise rather than struggle, upon belief in the inevitability of capitalism. Between the great waves of advance and growth which now marked the movement, the leaders of this school were able to assert their influence not only over the expanded upper section of the working class but over the newly organised unskilled workers. Employers and politicians were quick to seize the opportunities with which this attitude of mind presented them. There were, indeed, some cases of direct corruption,<sup>1</sup> but much more important in practice was the acceptance of a ruling-class point of view which Lenin noted as characteristic of this group in the imperialist epoch.

"Obviously, out of such enormous super-profits it is possible to bribe the labour leaders and the upper stratum of the labour aristocracy. And the capitalists of the 'advanced' countries are bribing them in a thousand different ways, direct and indirect, overt and covert. This stratum of the bourgeoisified workers, or 'labour aristocracy' who are quite philistine in their mode of life, in the size of their earnings and in their outlook, serves as the principal social (not military) prop for the bourgeoisie. They are the real agents of the bourgeoisie in the labour movement, the labour lieutenants of the capitalist class." (Lenin, *Imperialism*.)

Far-sighted employers saw that trade unions under tame leadership could be useful instruments in labour relations. For example, Mr. W. Knox, secretary of the National Association of Master Builders, the organisation of large contractors, told the Royal Commission on Labour that he attributed a lessening of the number of disputes to the fact that both the workers and the employers were better organised. It was, he agreed, "easier

<sup>1</sup> In 1889, for example, it was revealed (in the *Labour Elector* newspaper) that Henry Broadhurst, the secretary of the T.U.C. and its Parliamentary Committee, had supported the Liberal candidature of John Brunner (one of the chiefs of the firm Brunner-Mond which was later to be a constituent part of the giant Imperial Chemical Industries), and that immediately afterwards Brunner had transferred to him fifteen of his Ordinary Shares, the interest on which was 49 per cent.

to arrange business with the representatives of the unions rather than indiscriminately with a lot of men." (Royal Commission on Labour, Group C, Question 19, 129-31.)

The tendency to "arrange business with the representatives of the unions" grew alongside the development of the body of permanent paid trade union officials, which, unknown in 1850, grew to 600 or 700 by 1892 and continued to increase. With his outlook based upon the acceptance of capitalism, the official tended to become a professional man, concerned rather with technicalities and short-term problems in his industry than with any deeper consideration of the long-term interests and policies of the working class as a whole. An extreme example of this attitude of mind was that of the cotton union officials who were often willing to serve the employers' associations in the same capacity when offered higher salaries.

"Their main duty, when acting for the employers or the workmen, is to secure uniformity in the application of collective agreements as between mill and mill: and such a duty, it is argued, like that of a valuer or accountant, is independent of personal opinion or bias, and can be rendered with equal fidelity to either client. Such transfers came to be resented, and in some quarters it was alleged that these officials accepted 'too implicitly the employers' assumptions'." (Webbs, *op. cit.*, p. 479, in Chapter IX, dealing with the period 1890 to 1920.)

The influences which were brought to bear upon trade union officials and the consequent evolution of their attitudes are well described in an account written by a "thoughtful artisan", and quoted by the Webbs (*op. cit.*, pp. 469-71):

"The former vivid sense of the privations and subjection of the artisan's life gradually fades from his mind; and he begins more and more to regard all complaints as perverse and unreasonable. With this intellectual change may come a more invidious transformation. Nowadays the salaried officer of a great trade union is courted and flattered by the middle class. He is asked to dine with them, and will admire their well-appointed houses, their fine carpets, the ease and luxury of their lives. Gradually, his own way of life changes and he finds himself at issue with his members . . . he attributes the breach to the influence of a clique of malcontents, or perhaps to the wild views held by the younger generation. They think he is proud and 'stuck up', over-cautious and even apathetic in trade affairs."

But while such officials might easily "find themselves at issue with their members", there was a strong current of opinion in capitalist circles, particularly among the Liberals, which favoured the acceptance and use of such officials. The appointment of two trade unionists, Thomas Burt of the Miners and Broadhurst of the Stonemasons, to under-secretaryships in the Liberal cabinet of 1886 was striking evidence of the growth of this view.

Another characteristic figure of this period was John Burnett, rebel leader of the engineers' Nine Hours' Movement of 1871, who in 1886 became an official of the new Labour Department of the Board of Trade.

"From the militant blacksmith of the Nine Hours Strike, when without any organisation or funds, he inspired men and women to challenge the mighty Armstrong, Burnett became the election campaigner for Gladstone and the Liberal Party, the apologist for trade unions with friendly benefits, claiming that 'no stronger barrier to social revolution exists', and the advocate of the 'broad green cloth' around which conflicting interests could be shown to be identical. A post under a Liberal President of the Board of Trade was no wrench with his past." (J. B. Jefferys, *The Story of the Engineers*, 1946, pp. 110-11.)<sup>1</sup>

But even this was not the limit of ambition: 1906 was to see John Burns, once a revolutionary Socialist and one of the leaders of the historic London Dock strikes of 1889, become a minister in a Liberal Cabinet.

At the same time, both of the great ruling class parties sought to buy the support, or at least the acquiescence, of the working class by minor reforms. It was the radical-imperialist industrialist Joseph Chamberlain who evolved the theory of the "ransom"—the price of a docile working class, and even ventured to use the name of socialism itself, saying: "Every kindly act of legislation by which the community has sought to discharge its obligations is socialism, and is none the worse for that." The technique was brought to fuller and more spectacular development by Lloyd George, the Liberal leader, in the period of tremendous trade union militancy in the years before 1914.

<sup>1</sup> At this time similar trends were developing all over Europe: Bernstein's anti-Marxist propaganda among the German Social-Democrats, Millerand's and Jaurès' advocacy of Socialists joining capitalist governments in France, the appearance of "economism" (leaving politics to the Liberals) in Russia, all began in 1898-1900.

Thus the period under review was one of complex and profound economic and social change which had many consequences for the working class. In the seventies and eighties, Britain's vast and growing economy shuddered under the impact of powerful competition, but the subsequent replacement of industrial monopoly by an imperialist monopoly did for a time stabilise British capitalism. The stabilisation was, however, only temporary and the burden of readjustment was thrown on the workers. Problems were shelved, not solved: the period which began with the Great Depression ended with the slaughter of the Great War and the first of the devastating slumps of the inter-war years. But while the old society was changed and rent asunder by its contradictions, the working class was growing in concentration and cohesion, in power and understanding, a development which must lead to conflict with those small but influential sections whose policy it was to spread and cultivate capitalist ideas among the workers. Despite the threats and blandishments of the ruling class, the heady propaganda of imperialism, the passivity and even downright corruption of the old leadership, the new ideas of socialism and militancy gained ground as the working class of Britain moved forward from the epoch of the struggle for independence to the epoch of the struggle for power.

## CHAPTER V

# THE REVIVAL OF SOCIALISM

### 1. *From Radicalism to Socialism*

IN 1875, only men over forty-five had even a lad's memories of the great days of Chartism, and only men over fifty-five a lad's memories of Robert Owen's Grand National. It seemed that socialism in Britain was almost extinct. Ten years later, the situation had been transformed. Hope was springing again among the downtrodden masses, who were organising and striking; the dominating Liberal illusion of inevitable progress under capitalism was losing its grip even on some sections of the aristocracy of labour. Workers' Radical clubs were demanding Government action in defence of the standard of living. Above all, a new generation of British socialist leaders was emerging: Marxism inspired alike the incessant and self-sacrificing propaganda of the Social-Democratic Federation, the brilliant teaching of William Morris and Tom Mann's gigantic work in building mass trade unionism. The revived conception of a political Labour Movement, independent in its ideas, organisation and objectives, was the distinguishing feature of the great developments associated, a few years later still, with the name of Keir Hardie. The British working class was like a blindfolded giant beginning to remove the bandages from his eyes.

In the 'seventies and 'eighties, with the whole of society in rapid flux, and its fundamental principles now subject to anxious questioning, wide popular campaigns developed on a variety of issues: the extension of democracy, Ireland, imperialism, the land and the social problems arising from the Great Depression.

The initiation and strength of these campaigns came from the working class radicals organised in local clubs and associations which supported the Liberal Party but were now moving far in advance of the Liberal leadership. Indeed, the 'eighties and early 'nineties might be described as a period in which these radicals tried to transform the Liberal Party into a genuine



party of the people. They learned from experience that this was impossible, and at the same time the idea of expressing working-class opinion through working-class candidates logically led to the conception of independent organisation and independent policy, and henceforward this trend grew in strength.

"What the order of labour should do is to get their own candidates ready—their own men, men of their own order—who will *keep clear of the intrigues of both parties* (that is, Liberals and Conservatives; our emphasis—G.T.)" declared *Reynolds's Newspaper* on March 16th, 1875, discussing the fall of the Gladstone ministry. "The working classes did very much for Mr. Gladstone in the election of 1868, and what has been their reward? The people have been used, deceived, betrayed, for the interests of labour have never received the consideration of a moment of time, except when Mr. Lowe was devising taxes upon match-boxes or Mr. Bruce considering how little he should take off a wholly unjust sentence on gas stokers. Mr. Gladstone made use of his great majority to rule for the benefit of the middle class and to conserve the interests of the higher classes."

The advance guard of the workers was thus becoming clearer on the class significance of liberalism; early in the 'eighties, it turned to the foundation of socialist organisations.

The restiveness of the politically minded workers was a major factor underlying the evolution of the Liberal Party, in which two important trends, both of them radical and republican, were developing. One, to which reference has already been made in the previous chapter, was led by Joseph Chamberlain, the powerful Midlands industrialist, who after being Mayor of Birmingham became one of the city's M.P.s. in 1876, and by Sir Charles Dilke, M.P. for Chelsea from 1868 to 1886. It aimed, by means of a policy of social reform and an efficient political machine, to build a mass basis for the industrialist wing of the Liberal Party. They combined social reform with imperialism, however, and were violently opposed to Irish Home Rule, one of the dominating issues of the period, over which Chamberlain broke with Gladstone in 1887, to form the Liberal Unionist Party, a stepping stone on the way to the Conservatives, whom he later joined.

The other trend was led by Charles Bradlaugh, Radical and atheist propagandist, renowned for his tremendous campaign,

together with Annie Besant, against the blasphemy laws and other restrictions on publication. His National Secular Society, of which a number of members were to become outstanding socialist leaders, became a noted centre of progressive politics. In the 'eighties, Bradlaugh further enhanced his position as leader of advanced Radicalism by his six-years battle to take his seat in the House of Commons as an atheist who refused to take the oath after being elected for Northampton in 1880. Excluded from the House, he was repeatedly re-elected with increasing majorities until in 1886 he was allowed to take his seat without taking the oath. Though an inveterate opponent of socialism, Bradlaugh later joined vigorously in the fight for free speech when attempts were made to suppress socialist propaganda.

The strength of these radical trends within liberalism reflected the fact that the idea of complete political democracy at home was deeply rooted in the masses of workers and lower middle classes. One of the fundamental features of Chartism, it had never died out, and had indeed inspired the great battles for the Second Reform Bill in the 'sixties. There was growing discontent with the limited nature of the concessions made in the 1867 Act, by which the franchise had been extended only to the town artisans, leaving the poorer town workers and the miners and agricultural workers in the villages still voteless. Some of these latter groups gained the vote by the Third Reform Act passed by the Liberal Government in 1884, increasing the electorate (excluding Ireland) from under three million to nearly five million.<sup>1</sup>

From the end of the 'seventies, the fight for Irish freedom became one of the central problems of British politics for a number of reasons: the agricultural crisis there was desperately acute and widespread, involving the bulk of the population; the solid, disciplined block of Irish M.Ps. at Westminster played a vital part in British politics; English absentee landlords of estates in Ireland formed an important section of the Tory Party, while on the other hand there was a strong traditional sympathy between the Irish revolutionaries, led by Michael Davitt and his Irish Land League, and the politically

<sup>1</sup> Over twenty-five years later, in 1911, out of a population of 40 millions in the same territory, only 7,200,000 had the vote (in 1955 there were over 34 million electors out of 51 million people).

conscious English workers. While the Liberal Government temporised or sought to stamp out the revolutionary movement in Ireland, the English working-class radicals, side by side with Irish workers living in England, demonstrated for Ireland's freedom. On the other hand, Davitt strove for social demands as well as national liberation, founding in 1890 the Irish Democratic Labour Federation, which advocated co-operation between the workers of the two countries. George Lansbury of Poplar, one of the pioneers of the socialist revival and later leader of the Labour Party, was one of those who began their political awakening as radical campaigners for Irish freedom.

Indeed, the conquest and exploitation of other nations, which, as we have seen, was now becoming a basic feature of British politics and economics, outraged the strongest and most persistent principles of the British democratic tradition: radicals had always regarded imperialism as a Tory ramp.

In the mid-seventies, working class and radical organisations led the way in a mighty eruption of popular anger against Tory manœuvres abroad and preparations for war in the Balkans which was comparable with that which stopped British intervention in the American Civil War in the 'sixties. In 1876, the Bulgarians revolted against the oppressive Turkish Empire of which their country formed a province, and the Russians came to their aid. British opinion was outraged by the cruel atrocities committed by the Turkish troops, but the Conservative Government of Disraeli, hungry for more power and territory in the Middle East, prepared to drag the country into war on the side of the Turks. The Government's policy was widely condemned and a campaign against war was begun at a meeting at the Working Men's Club and Institute in Haggerston Road, Hackney, called by a London committee set up on the question, with Thomas Mottershead, of the Labour Representation League, as its Chairman.<sup>1</sup> Similar meetings quickly followed in many provincial centres, and it was only after this startling expression of public opinion that Gladstone, though already deeply concerned about the position in the Balkans, published his famous pamphlet *The Bulgarian Horrors*, a

<sup>1</sup> He had been a member of the General Council of the First International which often met at the Radical Club at 37 Clerkenwell Green (now the Marx Memorial Library) of which he was secretary.

searing denunciation of the Turks, which sold 40,000 copies in the first four days. A little later, a group of men, some of them radicals, and others, like William Morris, not hitherto politically active, formed the Eastern Question Association to oppose the Government's intention, as Morris said, "to drag us into a shameful and unjust war".

Morris drew up the manifesto *To the Working Men of England* in May, 1877. "Who are they that are leading us into war?" he asked. "Greedy gamblers on the Stock Exchange, idle officers of the Army and Navy (poor fellows!), worn out mockers of the clubs, desperate purveyors of exciting war news for the comfortable breakfast tables of those who have nothing to lose by war; and lastly, in the place of honour, the Tory Rump that we fools, weary of peace, reason and justice, chose at the last election to represent us. O shame and double shame if we march under such leadership as this in an unjust war against a people who are not our enemies, against Europe, against freedom, against nature, against the hope of the world." He also wrote a campaigning song which was sung by the thousands who attended the E.Q.A.'s meetings. Entitled "Wake, London Lads", it concludes:

What! shall we crouch beneath the load,  
And call the labour sweet,  
And dumb and blind go down the road  
Where shame abides our feet?

Wake, London lads! The hour draws nigh,  
The bright sun brings the day;  
Cast off the shame, cast off the lie,  
And cast the Turk away.

Of the culminating meeting in the Exeter Hall in January, 1878, he wrote: "The evening meeting was magnificent, orderly and enthusiastic, though mind you it took some very heavy work to keep the enemies' roughs out, and the noise of them outside was like the sea roaring against a lighthouse. . . . There is no doubt that the last fortnight's agitation has stopped Dizzy from asking for money and proposing a Gallipoli expedition."

But on questions of foreign policy and imperialism too, the upper classes in the Liberal Party were parting company from

working-class and radical opinion. When the next Liberal Government was formed in 1880, it was soon involved in colonial wars itself, notably in Egypt (which Britain occupied) and the Sudan.

The Irish were the pacemakers in a powerful movement of protest from the countryside of all Britain and also played an important part in carrying forward the battle of ideas. In England, the struggle centred at first round wages and the heroic trade union work of Joseph Arch in the 'seventies; later it took a political form with the farm workers voting Liberal under Arch's guidance. In Scotland and Wales, as well as as Ireland, the main issues were rent and prices, and the movement developed beyond liberalism; this was the great period of the revolutionary radicalism of the Scottish crofters, led by the socialist laird and M.P., R. B. Cunninghame-Graham.

Ideas of land reform—taxation of land values, nationalisation of rent or of land itself—had engaged the attention of middle-class and working-class radicals since Chartist times. The Land Tenure Reform Association, founded by the economist John Stuart Mill in 1870, contained a number of outstanding representatives of both. It urged that the "unearned increase of the land" and its produce should go to society as a whole. In the Great Depression, with not only agriculture but the entire economy in acute and repeated crisis, a new stimulus was given to the land reform ideas of the advanced radicals, particularly the Irish Land League, whose leader Michael Davitt tried to combine a programme for the advancement of labour with national liberation and the reform of the land system.

The agitation reached a new peak with the publication in 1879 of *Progress and Poverty* by Henry George, an American who urged the abolition of all taxes except that on rent, which would thus be the "Single Tax". This approach was, of course, grossly oversimplified, but the insistence of its arguments, with the fresh, down-to-earth enthusiasm of the ever-expanding western frontiers, on land and labour—not capital—as the source of wealth revived an old truth and helped many to a new understanding of society. George's book reached a circulation of about 100,000 copies and in 1882 he came to Britain on a triumphant lecture tour; significantly enough, the Irish section of his tour was brought to an end by his arrest,

though he was released to continue his lectures in England. For most future socialists, land reform was a half-way house on their march from radicalism.

Thus the late 'seventies and early 'eighties saw a growing ferment of social criticism and radical democratic ideas, which gave rise to the revival of socialist thought, which up to that point had been confined almost entirely to a few individuals and small groups (notably among the community of exiled German workers in London) who gallantly carried on the traditions of the old International Working Men's Association. Symptomatic of the new trend was the formation in 1877 of the Guild of St. Matthew, an attempt by a London curate to develop a Christian Socialist Movement. But this was only part of the great expansion of popular discussion which was arising out of the powerful trends we have already noted.

In London, following the work of the Stratford Radical Club, Joseph Lane, a carter, founded the Labour Emancipation League, which conducted open-air agitation in the East End for the "establishment of a free social condition of society", and the public ownership of land and the means of producing wealth. Tom Mann, a young engineer with more than half a century of tremendous activity as a revolutionary trade unionist before him, later recalled that he "devoured" Henry George's book, to which he owed much for enabling him to see the limitations of the ideas of his fellow skilled workers, and formed a society for the discussion of social questions. But, fortunately, he said, he could also see the necessity for common ownership of machines and capital as well as land. And so, in a "rough and tumble way", at open-air meetings in the parks and elsewhere, he found his way to socialism. (Tom Mann, *How I Became a Socialist*, 1896, quoted Hobsbawm, *op. cit.*, p. 35.)

Another young skilled worker who was to be a leading socialist and trade unionist, James Macdonald, an Edinburgh tailor, first met some socialists when, after coming to London in 1881, he joined a Scottish club which met in a public house in Tottenham Street. "One evening", he wrote, "the landlord told us there was a meeting being held in another room of some of the red-hot Fenians and dynamiters in England. . . . They were vehemently denouncing the Coercion Bill of the Liberal Government. . . . We followed up the meetings of these men, and formed a sort of opposition. . . . But gradually we found we

were losing ground, and then we threw in our lot with the others, and formed the Central Marylebone Democratic Association." What really attracted him to socialism, however, was an article by Marx's friend and collaborator, Frederick Engels, in the London Trades Council's paper, *The Labour Standard*. (J. Macdonald, *How I became a Socialist*, 1896, pp. 51-60, quoted Hobsbawm, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-3.)

And the development of advanced radical and socialist ideas was not confined to London, though at this stage the metropolis was in the lead. Early in 1879 the Midland Social Democratic Association was formed at Birmingham, with a programme which included the abolition of the Monarchy, the House of Lords and the State Church. It carried on correspondence with people over a wide area of the country: at one meeting, letters were read from, among other places, Woking, Walsall, Maidstone, Guildford, Plumstead and Chesterfield. The correspondent from Chesterfield stressed the "necessity of a national organisation of the leading trades for their mutual protection against the tyranny of capital, with a view to the ultimate suppression of the capitalist class." The Guildford letter raised the question of "the organisation of the whole southern counties on a Social-Democratic basis."<sup>1</sup> (*Reynolds's Newspaper*, January 5th and 26th, 1879.)

The time was now becoming ripe for a clear analysis of contemporary problems, for the teaching of scientific socialism and for the preparation for an independent working-class party. This was the purpose of the articles by Engels in *The Labour Standard*. The working class, he said, was becoming aware that it had for some time been "moving in the wrong groove", that the present restriction of the struggle to wages and hours only was keeping it "in a vicious circle out of which there is no issue", and that "it is not the lowness of wages which forms the fundamental evil, but the wages system itself".

Once this knowledge was spread amongst the working class, "the position of the trade unions must change considerably. They will no longer enjoy the privilege of being the only organisation of the working class. At the side of, or above, the Unions of the special trades there must spring up a general

<sup>1</sup> A Social-Democratic Workers' Party had been in existence in Germany since 1869 and was now winning European renown by its fight for working-class rights against the Imperial Chancellor, Bismarck.

Union, a political organisation of the working class as a whole. . . . There is no power in the world which could for one day resist the British working class organised as a body." The Great Depression showed that the capitalist class had become "unable to manage the immense productive system of this country". The working class must be given the chance of a turn. (*Labour Standard*, June 4th and August 6th, 1881; these articles are re-printed in Engels, *The British Labour Movement*, 1934.)

Such views proved "too strong" for the old-style Liberals who controlled the Trades Council, and rather than tone them down, Engels severed his connection with the paper. Nevertheless, as we have seen from one example, they had an important effect upon thoughtful trade unionists who were anxiously looking for a way forward.

## 2. *The Social-Democratic Federation*

The need for a new party was now plainly evident, and it was at this point that the initiative was taken by Henry Mayers Hyndman, a wealthy, able and ambitious stockbroker. In 1880 he read Marx's *Capital* in the French edition (it did not appear in English until 1887) and later took up a good deal of the author's time in discussion of the theory it propounded.

In the following spring, he was able to start discussions among the London radical clubs, and at a foundation conference to which middle-class and working-class radical organisations had been invited, the Democratic Federation was formed, with Hyndman as president. Delegates were presented with a small book by him, entitled *England for All*, summarising Marx's views without acknowledging the source; this latter circumstance precipitated a breach between Hyndman and Marx, who regarded him as a careerist.

The Federation campaigned at first on a radical policy relating to foreign affairs, land nationalisation and, above all, to Ireland, protesting against the Liberal Government's intensification of repression (or "coercion" as it was commonly called at the time), with the arrest of Parnell and other Irish leaders and the suppression of the Land League.

*England for All* was only the first of countless popular explanations of Marxism which poured from Hyndman's pen in ensuing decades in the form of articles, books and pamphlets.



They were valuable in that despite weaknesses they put before the British workers some presentation of Marx's scientific socialist analysis of capitalist society. In *Socialism and Slavery*, published in 1885, for instance, he wrote:

"Socialism in fact no longer consists of mere Utopian schemes or attempts to stir up general discontent among the suffering classes; it is no longer represented by men who think they can reach at one bound an almost unattainable happiness for mankind, or round up little oases of loving co-operators amid a desert of anarchical competition; it is a distinct scientific historical theory, based upon political economy and the evolution of society, taking account of the progress due to class struggles in the past, noting carefully the misery and the inevitable antagonism engendered by our present system of production, and following the movement into the future with a view to handling the ever-increasing power of man over nature for the benefit of the whole community, not to pile up wealth for the capitalist class and their dependents. Such a change can, of course, only be brought about by putting an end both to the existing competition for individual or class gain above, and the competition for mere subsistence wages below. Organised co-operation for existence in the place of . . . class domination, international friendship in place of national rivalry: these are our aims. Thus the class struggle which we see going on under our eyes, the revolution in the methods of production—steam, machinery, electricity, etc.—which is affecting all classes, appears in the thoughts of men as a conflict between the principles of collectivism and individualism, between the system of public and private property."

Hyndman was the pioneer of Marxist teaching in Britain, and some of his writings, such as *Socialism and Slavery* and *The Historical Basis of Socialism*, were of great value, while his book on India was the first British attempt to show the link between tyranny and exploitation. Writing in 1911, Lenin called him a "determined enemy of British imperialism" and paid tribute to his "noble campaign of exposure" of its atrocities from 1878 onwards. (*Lenin on Britain*, p. 85.) In a general assessment of him, Lenin said that he was an "English bourgeois philistine who, being best of the best of his class, finally finds the road to socialism for himself, but never completely throws off bourgeois traditions, bourgeois views and prejudices." (Lenin, *Works*, Fourth Russian Edition, Vol. 17, p. 274. A variant translation of this passage will be found in *Lenin on Britain*, p. 87.)

The basic weakness of Hyndman's exposition of Marxism, and consequently of the theoretical outlook of most of his followers in the Federation in which he was a dominating figure, was the assumption that the contradictions within capitalism, which Marx had so ably analysed, would automatically produce its downfall. In 1889, for example, he wrote:

"A very, very few years in any case must bring us to another economic crisis. . . . That is why Social Democrats should never cease to point out to workers that this very collapse, if they educate themselves and make ready in earnest to make an end to the class war, will enable them to take hold once and for all of the great means and instruments of production and transport . . . which will then fall from the incompetent hands of the landlords and capitalists." (*Justice*, November 23rd, 1889, quoted Hobsbawm, *op. cit.*, p. 43.)

Hyndman was therefore a propagandist rather than an organiser and leader in the sense of a "tribune of the people" capable of leading them through their daily needs and aspirations into the struggle for socialism. The preaching of passivity exemplified above gradually influenced his own thinking, and frequently led him into actions harmful to the working class, particularly where British foreign policy was concerned. Thus in 1900, when the S.D.F. was carrying on a heroic struggle against the Boer War, he suddenly came forward with the proposal to give up the campaign and "leave it to the Liberals". (It was characteristic of the ever-present cleavage in the S.D.F. between the Hyndman group of leaders and the mass of the party, that he was isolated on this question at the annual conference that year and did not venture to run for the Executive Committee.) Hyndman remained at bottom a bourgeois political "boss" and finally broke with Marxism.

Principles are bigger than personalities, however, and the working-class militants to whom Hyndman gave some initiation into the scientific understanding of society, played a vital part in the spreading of socialist ideas in Britain. Harry Quelch, for example, the London trade unionist who was for many years one of Hyndman's closest supporters, was, said Lenin, on his death in 1913 "in the front ranks of those who fought steadfastly and with conviction against opportunism and Liberal-Labour politics in the British Labour movement." (Quoted, *Lenin on Britain*, p. 118.)

The vigorous development of socialist ideas in the Federation produced important changes in both the policy and the membership of the organisation. Its opposition to the Liberal Party and its growing preoccupation with socialism and issues such as housing and the eight-hour day caused members of the old Liberal-Radical school, both middle and working class, to fall away. On the other hand, the Federation, though small, was attracting able workers and intellectuals who saw that the future lay with the working-class movement, but not along the road of radicalism. Like the distinguished artist and writer, William Morris, who joined the Federation in 1883, they felt "bound to act" for the destruction of capitalism with its "unendurable" contrasts of wealth and poverty, and that such a system could be destroyed only "by the united discontent of numbers . . . in other words the antagonism of classes which the system has bred, is the natural and necessary instrument of its destruction".

The Federation now adopted a socialist programme: 100,000 copies were sold of its policy statement, *Socialism Made Plain*, which acknowledged its Marxist source. A little later, the publication of *Today*, a monthly magazine, and of *Justice*, the Federation's weekly organ, was begun by H. H. Champion, another upper-class convert to socialism (the son of a major-general, he was himself a retired artillery officer). Vigorous propaganda was carried on not only in London, where James Macdonald brought over the Marylebone Democratic Association, but in a number of provincial centres. A branch was established in Blackburn, for instance, after a campaign during a cotton strike had been conducted by five leading members: J. L. Joynes (a former master at Eton), J. E. Williams, (a worker who had been a member of the old German Social-Democratic Club in London), Hyndman, Morris and Macdonald. In Edinburgh, the Austrian socialist, Scheu, took part in the formation of the Scottish Land and Labour League, which affiliated to the Federation in 1884. In that year, the Labour Emancipation League also affiliated, and at the annual conference the Federation's socialisation programme was extended from the land, railways and banks to all means of production, distribution and exchange. To mark this stage of development, the name "Social-Democratic Federation" was now adopted. The new programme was drawn up by a committee consisting of

Champion, Morris, Lane (of the L.E.L.) and Belfort Bax (who won the warmest praise of the founders of Marxism for his appreciation of their theory).

Thus, so far from being a vague, woolly aspiration for the good life (the name of Morris is often particularly abused in this respect), or as it is sometimes alternatively presented, only concerned with the most immediate and short-term practical reforms, British socialism in its pioneer days in fact owed its inspiration to Marx, the bulk of whose writings was based on British experience and illustrated from British conditions. Engels, living in London throughout the 'eighties and early 'nineties, was in close touch with several of the active pioneers. The utopian socialism of Owen's time was dead; reformist Social-Democracy of the Fabian type did not yet exist. The early British socialists were Marxists, or thought of themselves as such, though taking them as a whole there were weaknesses in their appreciation of the theory and still greater defects in their application of it to practical politics.

It is important to bear in mind that the S.D.F., as its name indicates, was a federation—we have already noted some of the organisations from which it was built—and there were within it a variety of trends and individual viewpoints, especially in those early years. Particularly to be noted were the trade unionists among its members, who were to play parts of decisive importance in building and moulding the modern Labour Movement. They gained from Marxism a wide outlook and a theoretical understanding without allowing their power of mass leadership to be shrivelled by the narrow, dogmatic sectarianism which was the Federation's cardinal weakness. The engineers Tom Mann and John Burns were to be two of the triumvirate which led the London dock strike of 1889 (as we shall see, one of the great turning points in the history of British Labour) and were to found the mass dockers' organisation which became the Transport and General Workers' Union. Will Thorne, the London gasworker who was helped to improve his reading and writing by a distinguished fellow-member, Marx's daughter Eleanor, was to found the gasworkers' union out of which the National Union of General and Municipal Workers grew. With them may be noted James Macdonald, who was to become secretary of the London Trades Council, Harry Quelch, the future editor of *Justice* and chairman of the

L.T.C., and John L. Mahon of the Scottish Land and Labour League. George Lansbury, too, who was to be loved by generations of Labour men and women particularly in East London, also joined the socialist movement through the S.D.F.

But great though the talents and destinies of many members of the Federation were, it was not possible at this time to mould it into a true workers' party. The organisation was dominated by Hyndman, who sought by personal intrigue to maintain dictatorial rule.

Such a situation was intolerable and matters soon came to a head; at the end of 1884, the majority of the Federation's Council resigned in a body and proceeded to establish a new organisation, the Socialist League. The majority, who included Morris, Eleanor Marx, Edward Aveling, Bax, Mahon and some of the leading workers, issued a manifesto denouncing the Hyndman clique. Socialist organisation required no "skilful and shifty leader to whom all persons and opinions must be subordinated", it said, accusing the leadership of "a tendency to political opportunism, which, if developed, would have involved us in alliances, however temporary, with one or other of the political factions". At the same time, "among those who favoured these views of political adventure, there was a tendency towards national assertion, the persistent foe of Socialism", and with this policy had developed "arbitrary rule inside the Federation", with attempts to "crush out local freedom in affiliated bodies".

So, with the support of the Labour Emancipation League (London), the Scottish Land and Labour League and a number of S.D.F. branches, the new body started its short but brilliant career as a socialist propaganda organisation. William Morris was its heart and soul: both the League and its organ *Commonweal* (which he financed) reflected his talents and his volcanic indignation against the evils of capitalism. Here was the greatest of English socialists with a group of workers and intellectuals—their membership was never more than a few hundred—seeking to build a real Socialist Party in Britain.

There is no basis whatever for the lie sedulously cultivated by the right-wing of the Labour Party that Morris and his friends broke with Hyndman because Hyndman was under the influence of the "sordid materialism" of Marx, while Morris was inspired by a vague impractical love of humanity and

"goodness" which is held up by contrast as the British tradition of socialism. There is not the slightest hint in the declaration of the seceding members of the S.D.F. that their disagreement with Hyndman was over the question of Marxism: rather did they criticise him for his "opportunism", which must end in alliances with one or other of the ruling-class parties.

Morris himself, artist, poet and craftsman, was attracted to the S.D.F., as we have seen, by its doctrine of class struggle which made so many things plain and showed the way to end the ugly, stifling oppression of capitalist rule. Writing in 1894 (when he had been reconciled with the S.D.F.) of his conversion to Socialism, he declared:

"The hope of past times was gone, the struggles of mankind for many ages had produced nothing but this sordid, aimless, ugly confusion; the immediate future seemed likely to intensify all the present evils by sweeping away the last survivals of the days before the dull squalor of civilisation had settled down on the world. This was a bad look-out indeed, and, if I may mention myself as a personality and not as a mere type, especially so to a man of my disposition, careless of metaphysics and religion, as well as of scientific analysis, but with a deep love of the earth and the life on it, and a passion for the history of the past of mankind. . . . So there I was in for a fine pessimistic end of life, if it had not somehow dawned on me that amidst all this filth of civilisation the seeds of a great change, what we others call the Social Revolution, were beginning to germinate. The whole face of things was changed to me by that discovery, and all I had to do then in order to become a Socialist was to hook myself on to the practical movement, which I have tried to do as well as I could." (*William Morris: Centenary Edition*, ed., G. D. H. Cole, 1946, p. 658.)

Morris had difficulty with Marxist economics—"Whereas I thoroughly enjoyed the historical parts of *Capital*," he said, "I suffered agonies of the brain over reading the pure economics of that great work" (*ibid.*, p. 656)—but he did master it and his understanding of historical materialism was profound, as can be seen from his major prose works. *The Dream of John Ball* (1888) is based upon a Marxist interpretation of English history: *News from Nowhere* (1890) is an imaginative account, based in part upon Morris's own experience of London street battles, of the revolution in England and the happy society that would follow; *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome*, written in

collaboration with Belfort Bax in 1893, is an exposition which is a model of its kind.

"These are days of combat," said Morris in a lecture on *Art and Socialism* in 1884. "Who can doubt *that* as he hears all around him the sounds that betoken discontent and hope and fear in high and low, the sounds of awakening courage and awakening conscience? . . . To say the governing classes in England are not afraid of freedom of speech, *therefore* let us abstain from speaking freely, is a strange paradox to me. Let us on the contrary press in through the breach which valiant men have made for us: if we hang back we make their labours, their sufferings, their deaths of no account. . . ." How could they of the middle classes help the workers? he asked, and answered: "By renouncing our class, and on all occasions when antagonism rises up between the classes casting in our lot with the victims. . . . There is no other way." (*ibid.*, pp. 643-4.)

The temper of Morris's socialism may be finally illustrated in two stanzas from his marching song, *The Song of the Workers* (*ibid.*, p. 464), published in 1885 after his break with the S.D.F.:

O ye rich men hear and tremble; for with words the sound is  
rife,  
Once for you and death we laboured; changed henceforward is  
the strife.  
We are men and we shall battle for the world of men and life;  
And our host is marching on . . .

On we march then, we the workers, and the rumour that ye  
hear  
Is the blended sound of battle and deliverance drawing near;  
For the hope of every creature is the banner that we bear,  
And the world is marching on.

Neither Morris nor the League, then, rejected Marxism and the theory of class struggle. The problem which they, like their comrades in the Federation, had to face was that of applying theory to practice. Disgusted by the intrigues and opportunism of Hyndman—their worst estimations were to be confirmed soon by the scandalous revelation that the Federation accepted Tory money to put up candidates in the 1885 Election—they

flew to the opposite position, which was indeed also an essential part of Hyndman's own teaching and of the outlook of most early socialists—that the only way was propaganda and waiting for the Revolution.

The declaration by the ten seceding members of the S.D.F. Executive said that in the present situation, a socialist organisation had

“... no function but to educate the people and to organise such as it could get hold of to take their due place when the crisis shall come which will force action upon us. We believe that to hold out as baits hopes of the amelioration of the condition of the workers to be wrung out of the necessities of the rival factions of our privileged rulers is delusive and mischievous.”

The League thus carried over one of the basic weaknesses of the Federation—the inability to integrate theory and practice, to teach the workers and lead them towards the objective of socialism through the workers' own day to day struggles, which must inevitably be conducted in the “hopes of amelioration”. The small groups of socialist pioneers were trying to establish among the British people a new social and political philosophy, a wonderful new outlook which explained the roots of the evils of society and pointed the road forward to a new world. Capitalism stood condemned and must be swept away; to do this, it was rightly felt that an uncompromising break must be made with the theory dominant in the Labour Movement for some decades that the objective was to seek by partial reforms a more comfortable place for the working class, or at least the better-off, organised section of the workers, within capitalist society. For generations, bourgeois reformers had been fostering this trend within the working class, using it as a means of mobilising support for their own objectives, which were basically the creation of more suitable conditions for the development of capitalism: indeed, as we have noted, the Chamberlainite radicals were engaged at this very moment on the formulation of such a programme. There was a strong tendency among the socialists, therefore, both of the League and the Federation, to regard immediate reforms, even those for which they were prepared to fight, as “palliatives”, the very name suggesting that so far from being the stuff of political life, such reforms were rather undesirable as disguising the



realities of capitalism and distracting the workers from their true objectives.

Out of this attitude arose the initial and enduring inability, to use the phrase which Engels applied to the S.D.F., "to fasten on to the real needs of the people". It was also the explanation of the detached attitude which most of the socialists took towards the trade unions; only individuals led by their natural instinct for mass work achieved anything in this sphere. On the other hand, of course, it should be remembered that the old unions, dominated by Liberal and Tory "aristocrats of labour", crippled and sometimes ruined by the drain of unemployment pay, were by no means an easy field of work for vigorous, forward-looking socialists. And with the mass of the workers overwhelmingly liberal in their political outlook, it was natural that the socialist pioneers should give all their hearts and minds to propaganda for socialism. Their weakness was that many of them never advanced beyond this position.

The other principal outcome of this attitude was the distrust of all politics and political manœuvre outside of the direct struggle for socialism. Morris felt it strongly, particularly in regard to Parliament, which for a time he saw merely as a ruling-class snare—and the League's distrust of politics attracted a strong anarchist element which, after influencing Morris for a time, was to drive him out of the League and smash it, though in the early days of the organisation Engels had hoped it might provide a rallying point for a "kernel of people who have a good theoretical understanding". In freeing himself from anarchism, however, Morris achieved his own political maturity. It is significant, both for Morris and the S.D.F., that he was reconciled with the Federation later, shortly before his death.

A third group calling themselves socialists, the Fabian Society, also came into being in 1884. At the outset, this was a discussion group of middle-class intellectuals in London which differed from the Federation and the League in containing practically no workers. It had at first no particular policy or programme, its members holding various views, including Marxism and anarchism. The society's principal positive contribution was the systematic research into social problems which was initiated mainly by Sidney and Beatrice Webb. The society was, however, of no practical importance until

1887, when a group of its members, notably Webb, Bernard Shaw and Graham Wallas, began to develop a consciously anti-Marxist, gradualist version of socialism, based upon orthodox bourgeois economics and political theory. This eventually became the foundation of the doctrine of the right-wing leadership of the Labour Party. The Fabians took no practical interest in day-to-day trade union struggles and deliberately discouraged the formation of independent working-class organisations to the point of sabotaging them. While the men of the League and the S.D.F., whatever their faults, were carrying the message of socialism to the people (the League made some headway in Yorkshire, Scotland, the North-east of England and Norwich, while the Federation's strongholds were in London, the Midlands and Lancashire), the Fabians were scheming to "permeate" or "infiltrate" the Liberal Party and convert it from within to their own brand of reformist socialism—which was itself only an elaboration of Liberal reformism. In reality, therefore, the Fabian leaders acted as though they were afraid of socialism and anxious that capitalism should make sufficient improvement in the workers' conditions to stave off socialism.

### 3. *Riding the Storm*

Meanwhile, the League and the Federation, their internal problems unresolved, were launched upon a stormy sea of social conflict arising from the mass misery of the Great Depression, the effects of which were felt particularly acutely in London, where some of the most dramatic events were to take place. The growing popular movement lifted the S.D.F. out of the sordid disrepute into which it had fallen, and for both organisations, these were years of magnificent propaganda effort. Morris was ceaselessly at work, writing articles for *Commonweal* (which he both edited and sold on the streets), delivering lectures to working men's clubs and speaking in the open air.

The ruling class and the authorities too had heard the rumblings of the storm, and the socialist pioneers had to face constant police interference and consequent fines and imprisonment. One of the biggest socialist victories was in 1885 at Dod Street, Limehouse, where League and S.D.F. speakers had been repeatedly arrested, and the police on one occasion charged

and broke up the meeting. These weekly events roused the anger of working-class London, and the radical clubs came out in support of the socialists at a combined meeting at Dod Street. This time the crowd was too big to allow the police to arrest the speaker; Morris was arrested later, but was soon discharged. Next Sunday, "the police gave way. A procession was organised from Stepney Green: Radical Clubs, the S.D.F., and the Socialist League, with bands and banners all came to Dod Street, Limehouse. Never had an East End street been so famous. The crowd was so great that it filled the entire street and overflowed into Burdett Road." (H. W. Lee and E. Archbold, *Social-Democracy in Britain*, p. 101.) The right to free speech in Dod Street had been won; events there set the pattern for many great free speech battles up and down the country.

In the bitter winter which followed, deep unrest grew among the unemployed. In February, 1886, the S.D.F. organised in Trafalgar Square a counter-demonstration to Tory "Fair Trade" speakers agitating for protectionism. The police got the socialists to move the crowd to Hyde Park, but on the way through Pall Mall the ragged marchers, provoked by the jeers of wealthy clubmen, stoned the club windows. Hooligans took advantage of the situation, and shops were looted. The S.D.F. leaders Hyndman, Burns, Champion and Williams were arrested, though they were acquitted at the subsequent trial at which Burns made an outstanding speech for the defence. The rioting on "Black Monday" caused panic among the upper classes: there was talk of guillotines and barricades in the West End, and the Lord Mayor's fund for the unemployed shot up to £75,000.

But the unemployed were only one factor in a situation of growing social and political tension in London. The workers generally, particularly the unskilled, were increasingly restive and were preparing for the historic struggle which was to mark the end of the decade. A wide democratic movement, both middle and working class, was actively struggling for the reform of London's narrow, corrupt and inefficient local government. Popular feeling, particularly that of the radical workers and the substantial population of Irish immigrants, was outraged by the Government's policy of coercion in Ireland and repression of free speech at home. The late 'eighties saw a vast expansion in the numbers and membership of the workingmen's

radical clubs, among whom Eleanor Marx, Edward Aveling and other socialists were conducting a most effective campaign of education and agitation; in 1885 the clubs came together to form the powerful Metropolitan Radical Federation. In reply, the authorities in alarm embarked upon a policy of intensified repression, operated by Sir Charles Warren, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner. Meetings in Trafalgar Square were banned.

So far from stemming the tide, however, attempted repression drew into one mighty flood the separate streams of popular anger. The arrest of the Irish Nationalist M.P. William O'Brien was the occasion for a call by the Metropolitan Radical Federation to defy the ban on Trafalgar Square meetings by united demonstration on November 13th, 1887. Democratic London responded in strength: between 80,000 and 100,000 people with bands and banners marched on the square from all quarters and were prevented from occupying it only by a tremendous display of force—4,000 police on duty in or around the square smashed up the contingents as they approached. Morris, who at the Clerkenwell Green assembly point had declared his determination to get through if possible, reached the square, though his contingent was scattered by a particularly vicious attack. One resolute group, including John Burns, J. Cunningham-Graham, M.P. and Mrs. Annie Besant, almost broke through the cordon: Burns and Cunningham-Graham were arrested. Later a detachment of Grenadier Guards, with ammunition and fixed bayonets, followed by two squadrons of Life Guards, were brought to the square. They were greeted by cries of "We want free speech", "We are all true Englishmen, Irishmen and Scotsmen and we only want our legal rights as citizens of London", and "Britons shan't be ruled by leaden bayonets". The struggle went on far into the evening, and among the many injured three later died. When a man named Alfred Linnell was fatally injured by the police in the following week, and the authorities tried to hush the matter up, a vast funeral procession followed his body from Soho to Bow Cemetery. One of the speakers in the last tribute at the graveside was Morris, who, to commemorate the occasion, wrote his deeply moving *Death Song*, at once a lament and a call to battle.

"Bloody Sunday" was by no means a defeat for the progressive

forces. A great united campaign developed, led by the Law and Liberty League, an organisation which was significant in that it was the first body in which socialist and radical organisations worked together. A liberal-radical-socialist coalition won a majority on the London County Council when it was formed in 1888, and this victory arose largely out of the widespread popular activity of which the events in Trafalgar Square were a part. In 1892 the Government officially admitted the right of meeting in the square.

The years 1886 and 1887 saw a crucial phase in the development of ideas about the tactics and strategy of working-class politics. Britain, and indeed the capitalist world generally, was passing through one of the worst periods of the Great Depression, and the workers were fighting back. The unemployed demonstrated in strength not only in London but in big provincial centres, such as Birmingham, Manchester and Leicester. In Belgium and Holland there were strikes and street battles, and in some places in the United States there was stormy agitation. The Irish revolutionary movement was at a peak point, and, as we have seen, was rousing a powerful response among the masses in Britain. The election of 1885, with its increased working-class and Irish representation, was at once an unmistakable sign of the times and a lesson for the future: it showed to friend and foe, sceptic and adventurer alike that the working class was a force increasingly to be reckoned with in the little world of Liberal-Tory ins and outs; it also suggested that very much more than eleven seats could be won if an election campaign were to be fought with a proper programme and organisation, instead of a scattering of individual worker candidates hanging on to the skirts of the Great Liberal Party. Further, the formidable position occupied by the highly disciplined Irish members in the House of Commons showed the power which could be wielded by a strong minority party independent of the two main ruling-class political groupings.

Engels, as we have seen, with a lifetime of experience of the international working-class movement behind him, had been the first to define clearly the line of independent advance. In his *Labour Standard* articles in 1881, he had pointed out that the extension of the franchise under the 1867 Reform Act remained a weapon which the trade unions had scarcely ever unsheathed. The unions should really march in the van. The

time was rapidly approaching when the working class would claim its full share of representation in Parliament and would understand that the struggle for high wages and short hours "and the whole action of trade unions as now carried on, is not an end in itself, but a means, a very necessary and effective means but only one of several means to a higher end: the abolition of the wages system itself." Thinking men of all classes were beginning to see that a new line must be struck out. "But in England, where the industrial and agricultural working class forms the immense majority of the people, democracy means the dominion of the working class, neither more nor less." With the present household suffrage, forty or fifty working-class M.Ps. could be elected. Those representatives might not in every case be themselves working men, "but no democratic party . . . will be successful unless it has a distinct working-class character. Abandon that, and you have nothing but sects and shams."

The growing activity of the workers in the later 'eighties and the extension of the franchise (which gave the workers as much power as universal suffrage would have given them in Germany), confirmed with ever greater emphasis and clarity the correctness of these views. Universal suffrage, said Engels in a letter on the situation in Britain and Germany, "was the best lever for a proletarian movement at the present time". (Letter to Bebel October 28th, 1885; *Selected Correspondence*, 1941 ed., p. 442.) And in 1886 came a big advance by the political movement of the workers in the United States. Keenly watching all these developments, Engels was insistent that the working class must be helped to learn from its own experience that it must establish its own political party and that the objective of this party must be socialism.

The task of the socialists, he said, quoting the *Communist Manifesto*, was "to represent the movement of the future in the movement of the present", and to work along with the general movement at every stage "without giving up or hiding our own distinct position and even organisation". Above all, he emphasised in a letter to a friend in America,

"give the movement time to consolidate, do not make the inevitable confusion of the first start worse confounded by forcing down people's throats things which they cannot properly understand at present, but which they will soon learn. A million or two

working men's votes next November for a *bona fide* working men's party is worth infinitely more at present than a hundred thousand votes for a doctrinally perfect platform." (Letters to Florence Kelley Wischnewetsky, December 28th, 1886, and January 27th, 1887; *Selected Correspondence*, pp. 543-5.)

Tremendous interest was roused in England by the developments in America, and when Edward Aveling and Eleanor Marx returned from a lecture tour there at the end of 1886, the London radical clubs, which had recently been growing rapidly in numbers and strength, invited them to lecture. Thus began their powerful East End agitation, in which they sought to link the vital issues of Ireland, free speech and an independent Labour Party. At Easter, 1887, they spoke at a Hyde Park meeting against coercion in Ireland at which there were no less than fifteen platforms. Things were really moving. Engels noted: "It is now an immediate question of organising an English Working-men's Party with an independent class programme. If it is successful, it will relegate to a back seat both the S.D.F. and the Socialist League and that would be the most satisfactory end to the present squabbles." (Letter to Sorge, June 4th, 1887, quoted Hutt, *This Final Crisis*, p. 109.)

Not only in London, but, perhaps even more significantly for the future, in centres in various parts of Britain and in the organised Labour Movement nationally, support for the idea of independent working-class politics was gaining in strength and coherence. Trade unionists were beginning to take a wider and deeper interest in public affairs from their own particular standpoint, an interest which was catered for by a growing number of pamphlets and newspapers such as the *Cotton Factory Times*. Local committees and associations were beginning to be formed for independent labour representation, though the most important of these, the Bradford Labour Union, was still two or three years in the future.

In 1886, the T.U.C. itself responded to the new mood and to the electoral successes of the previous year by setting up a Labour Electoral Committee, and though there were signs that it would, like its predecessor the Labour Electoral League, slip into the wake of the Liberal Party, in 1887 it took the name of the Labour Electoral Association, describing itself as "the centre of the National Labour Party". Recent events, it said in a

reference to the Irish Party in its Manifesto, "have shown what a united and active party can do in the House of Commons. It has practically succeeded in emancipating a people. If the British toilers wish to improve their position, they must adopt similar means. . . . Working men must form themselves into Labour Electoral Associations, as centres to organise the people." (Quoted, H. Pelling, *The Origins of the Labour Party, 1880-1900*, 1954.)

At this point H. H. Champion, who had broken with the S.D.F. in which he had been secretary and Hyndman's right-hand man at the time of the "Tory gold" affair, decided to throw his considerable abilities and financial resources into the new movement for a political party based on the trade unions. This move, which was to have important consequences, was part of the extensive changes in personnel, organisation and evolution of policy which had been going on in the socialist societies as they faced up in their various ways to the problem of political action.

The S.D.F., as a party, was in 1886-7 still mainly concentrating on propaganda. True, it made an exception on the question of the unemployed, organising London and provincial marches, deputations to M.Ps. and Boards of Guardians, and giving much publicity in *Justice*. The latter had a weekly column on trade union activities, under the heading of "Labour Notes". But as a party, the S.D.F. did woefully little to back up the manifold activities of its worker members. This weakness may be traced directly to Hyndman's influence and his attitude of superiority to most of the everyday problems facing the working class. Behind this lay the conception that the revolution would come of itself through the breakdown of capitalism, and that the business of a socialist organisation was to convert rather than to lead. Tom Mann later recalled that when in 1886 he raised the question of the eight-hour day at the Battersea Branch, John Burns at once expressed disapproval of his proposal. "He declared the time had long passed for such trivial reforms as the eight-hour day, notwithstanding that it was included among the palliative proposals of the S.D.F. Amid loud cheers, he declared that the capitalist system was on its last legs, and that it was our duty to prepare at once to seize the whole of the means of production and wipe out the capitalists altogether." After an even more "revolutionary" contribution from another



speaker, the Burns point of view was overwhelmingly endorsed amid thunderous applause.<sup>1</sup>

While the Federation was failing to make headway and was losing the support of fine working-class leaders such as Mann, the League was being torn to pieces by internal conflicts over policy, mainly centring round the old problems of immediate reforms and revolution, parliamentarism and anti-parliamentarism. In 1886, Morris still regarded with contempt parliamentary activity and those socialists "who would ally themselves as opportunity serves with one or other band of those who are direct enemies in the hope that those enemies can be cajoled or frightened into doing the Socialist's work and not the Bourgeois'." (Morris, *The Political Outlook*, 1886, quoted Hobsbawm, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-2.)

At the same time, he was feeling his way towards the Marxist attitude to reform which he later achieved. In the same year, he was arguing that if someone else was working for a "palliative" measure such as a Bill for the eight-hour day, socialists could not oppose them, though they might point out that such a Bill would be of very little benefit to the people, and that if they could combine to get it passed, "they can combine to take possession of all the means of production, kick out the employers and produce commodities for themselves. . . . Socialists must never be seen opposing measures in the direction of socialism alongside the reactionaries. If they do this, the public will think them either idiots or rogues, or perhaps a mixture of both." (*The Labour Leaf*, 1886, organ of the Clerkenwell Branch of the Socialist League, quoted Hobsbawm, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-4.)

Some members of the League were turning with enthusiasm to Engels' idea of an independent party based upon the working class. Among these were the trade unionists J. L. Mahon and Thomas Binning, who, with A. K. Donald, took a leading part in the formation in 1886 of the League's "Strike Committee". Next year, during the miners' strike in Northumberland, they, together with members of the S.D.F., set up there a North of England Socialist Federation, which at its strongest period had

<sup>1</sup> Yet three years later, Burns himself was playing a leading part in the great London dock strike, for practical and immediate bread-and-butter demands of the workers—an illustration of how the necessities of the class struggle were constantly breaking through the futile barriers which Hyndman and others sought to erect.

twenty-four branches. The new Federation did not take root and soon disappeared after the settlement of the strike, but it was evidence of a healthy desire on the part of the best elements in the League and the S.D.F. to get away from the frustrations of the London squabbles and Hyndmanite revolutionism and to forge a real bond with the workers in their daily struggle. They set out, as the declared objects of the Northern Federation state, to promote formation of a national and international Socialist Labour Party, to seek political power by promoting the election of socialists to Parliament and other public bodies, and to help trade unionism, co-operation and the national and international federation of labour.

The formulation of this programme precipitated a major conflict within the League. Morris himself, though he supported the idea of helping trade unionism and co-operation, strongly opposed sending socialists to Parliament as futile. The supporters of parliamentary action were defeated by the anarchists at the League's annual conference in 1887, and after another defeat and official repudiation in 1888, this group disappeared from the League. The Bloomsbury Branch, which included Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling, was expelled and carried on as the Bloomsbury Socialist Society, while the Mahon group walked out with what remained of the old Labour Emancipation League and formed a Labour Union, which, however, never developed beyond being a working-class club in Hoxton.

Meanwhile, the Fabian Society had by 1886-7 clarified its position, adopting a policy of immediate reforms by parliamentary means. But there was still division of opinion on the question of establishing a new party, the majority, led by the Webbs, favouring the "permeation" of the Liberals with ideas of social reform and public control, national and municipal. This policy sprang from the fact that the bulk of the membership were middle class in origin, with close personal contacts with the Liberals, and resided in London, where Sidney Webb occupied a leading place in the great liberal-radical campaign for municipal reform, which was to result in a majority for this alliance in the London County Council founded in 1888. In the provinces, where such conditions did not exist, the tactic of Liberal alliance and permeation did not have the same attraction.

And now the signs were multiplying that the emphasis was shifting from the socialist societies to the broader organised labour movement, the growth of whose activities and consciousness the socialists had hastened. Many socialists, as individuals, were turning to two distinct but related policies: broadening and strengthening the trade union movement, and building an independent working-class party on the basis of wide immediate reforms.

Champion, who had taken over leadership of the London section of the Labour Electoral Association, was pushing ahead on both these lines of advance, supported by some of the best young socialist workers, such as Mann, whose pamphlet on the eight-hour day he published in 1886, Burns, and the Hoxton group of "Parliamentarians" who had broken away from the Socialist League. In 1888, he began publication of *The Labour Elector*, a paper designed to have a wide, progressive, working-class appeal: it campaigned for the eight-hours demand, and also carried Mann's exposure of conditions at Brunner's Northwich chemical factory. The stirrings in the labour movement outside London, too, were beginning to have observable effect.

The Northumberland miners, reacting to the slump, the strike battle and the socialist campaign, refused to pay the parliamentary salaries of their Liberal leaders, Burt and Fenwick. In Scotland, James Keir Hardie, a determined young miner who had built the Ayrshire Miners' Union and the Scottish Miners' Federation, had realised from his own experience and from his reading of Henry George and S.D.F. literature that trade unionism was not enough and that a break must be made with the traditional Liberalism of the community in which he lived. In 1887, he met the London socialist leaders, including Engels, founded *The Miner*, a monthly paper, and was responsible for the first irruption of the new ideas at the T.U.C., when he attacked the secretary of the Parliamentary Committee, Henry Broadhurst, for supporting a "sweating" employer as a Liberal candidate at a by-election. In the spring of the next year, he became the miners' candidate in a by-election at Mid-Lanark.

Supported by the Labour Electoral Association, Hardie applied for the Liberal nomination; the programme he adopted at this stage was little different from that of a

number of Radical M.Ps., and his leaflets bore the slogan: "A vote for Hardie is a vote for Gladstone". He was, however, insistent upon the right of the miners to put up a candidate, and his determined stand on this point brought him into conflict with the Liberal machine. The Liberals chose a London barrister as their candidate and tried in vain to buy Hardie off with the offer of another constituency at the next election and an allowance of £300 a year if he got into Parliament.

When he refused this offer, the national leadership of the L.E.A. abandoned Hardie, who was thus left with socialist and radical support: his principal campaigners included Champion, Mahon, Mann, Murdoch (the crofters' leader), Cunninghame-Graham and a handful of Michael Davitt's friends. It was in this that the real historic significance of the by-election lay: though Hardie polled only a few hundred out of several thousand votes, and though his programme showed no sharp differentiation from Liberal radicalism, his insistence on *working-class* representation had for the first time shown that it was possible to make an organisational break with the Liberal machine.

The foundation of the Scottish Labour Party soon followed, with Cunninghame-Graham as president, Dr. G. B. Clark (Radical M.P. for Caithness) and John Ferguson (a supporter of Davitt) as vice-presidents, Shaw Maxwell (a Scottish supporter of Henry George) as chairman of the executive, and Keir Hardie as secretary. The Scottish Land and Labour League (led by Mahon, who had now rejoined the S.D.F.) merged with the new organisation which, it can thus be seen, represented a variety of progressive and socialist trends. It did not proclaim a socialist objective: its programme was one of political and social reform, including the legal eight-hour day, which was becoming the rallying point of militant trade unionists and non-sectarian socialists not only in Britain but in several European countries. Whatever its weaknesses, the strength of the new party lay in its emphasis on working-class political independence, in its growth out of the living experience of the working class. It was one of the most striking indications that the most active elements of the working-class rank and file of the Liberal Party were beginning to break away from the upper and middle-class sections, despite all the devices and

propaganda diversions of the leadership. Linked as this movement for political independence was with the beginnings of a new phase of militant mass trade unionism, it was to have momentous consequences for the development of the working class, now entering upon one of the most dramatic and stormy phases in its history.

## CHAPTER VI

# THE WORKING CLASS ON THE MARCH ONCE MORE

### 1. *The New Unionism*

THE revival of socialist ideas and the growing political awareness of the working class were only part of the seed-time of the 'eighties which was to produce such a tremendous harvest. Inextricably bound up with them was the beginning of a new spirit and outlook which were to lift trade unionism out of a hopeless impasse and give it a vigour and mass strength such as it had never known before.

The economic boom of 1871-2 had brought a marked expansion of organisation, both in the foundation of new unions and the expansion of the old, and it seemed that the unions had won an acknowledged place in society. But just as the leaders of the "amalgamated" school felt that they had "arrived", there was opening a period of recurrent economic crises and really fierce and determined attacks by the employers upon wages and hours. The unions, largely confined to the skilled and normally more regularly employed workers, were exhausted by the burden of unemployment pay and friendly benefits and often heavily in debt. The effect upon the newly established unions was catastrophic: no fewer than 320 societies were founded and disappeared in the years 1872 to 1885. The old craft unions, on the other hand, such as those of the masons, carpenters and ironfounders, became mere sick and burial clubs: they would not support strikes even against wage cuts or increased hours.

The old leaders, often saturated with the economic and political ideas of the capitalists, were largely devoid of any positive policy whereby their organisations could grow and assert their power in the way which the times so urgently demanded. There was no real national leadership: the T.U.C. spent much of its time discussing minor social reforms, and sectional interests were rampant, with many sordid inter-union disputes arising from technical change and the desperate scramble for work.

Determined resistance was offered in some industries to the employers' offensive, but as a rule it was ineffective. In 1878, a ten-weeks strike gripped Lancashire, where the cotton employers had demanded a 10 per cent. reduction in the wages of quarter of a million workers who finally had to accept the terms. A stonemasons' dispute which began in London and became a national trial of strength also ended in defeat. In the same year, the engineers, fighting to maintain their nine-hour day, were compelled to give way on Clydeside after two months of struggle there. In England the Amalgamated Society of Engineers conducted stubborn strikes in a number of big centres against an attempt to impose a longer day, and at great cost were able to defeat it. The Society regarded 1879 as "the darkest year in our life", when expenditure on strikes amounted to almost as much as in the previous twenty-six years. (J. B. Jefferys, *The Story of the Engineers*, pp. 96-7.)

In the coalfields, where manpower and production were to be doubled in the next thirty-five years, the miners entered the period of the Depression with "what seemed to be firmly established unions in several counties and with two complementary forms of national organisation, one for mutual support in economic struggles (the Amalgamated Association of Miners) and one for legislative and legal purposes (the Miners' National Union). Within a few years, the one is dead and the other is moribund." (R. P. Arnot, *The Miners*, Vol. I, 1949, p. 56.) In the mid-seventies, the Northumberland, Durham and Yorkshire Associations adopted the sliding scale, by which wages went up and down with the price of coal. This system together with wage reductions was forced on the South Wales men after lock-outs in 1873 and 1875, and in 1879 a less favourable sliding scale was forced on Durham after an unsuccessful strike. By 1880, mining trade unionism was at a low ebb: the A.A.M. had vanished in the previous year, the Yorkshire Association was almost extinguished and Lancashire was divided among a score or more of local unions. The M.N.U. had now the support of only Northumberland, Durham and Yorkshire. The plight of the miners was pitiable: the Northumberland wages, for example, were only half what they had been seven years before. And so the sorry tale continued into the 'eighties. But through the years, the aspiration for new tactics and a national miners' organisation grew, though hindered by outworn ideas

and the fear that the weaker districts would be a drain on the stronger. In this aspiration lay the germ of new and important developments.

The weight and driving force of the great upsurge which transformed the national trade union scene came primarily from two sources: first were the lowly paid and generally unskilled workers—notably in the docks and transport—who had hitherto been regarded as unorganisable, but were now drawn together in such great and comparatively stable masses that this idea was becoming out-dated. Secondly, they came from long organised industries in which the Depression had most clearly shown the futility of the old policies, such as mining, and from industries where technical change and numerical expansion were rendering most obviously unsuitable the old ideas of craft unionism.

Among the organised trade unionists concerned in the development of new policies, an important role was played by the small but influential group of young craftsmen, such as the engineers Tom Mann, John Burns and Fred Hammill, who became highly critical of the old policies, and as we have seen, turned to the Marxists, who alone put forward a programme for the workers first, last and all the time, and did not think in terms of the "orthodox economics" of the employers. Basing themselves on class solidarity as distinct from the narrow selfishness which was shackling and destroying the old craft organisations, they campaigned eagerly for a trade union movement which would embrace not merely a few hundred thousand skilled men but also the millions of semi-skilled and unskilled who were still unorganised.

To rally these millions, they put forward two slogans which made irrefutable sense to the workers, even though the bosses screamed that they would lead to economic collapse: they demanded a law to fix the working day at eight hours, and a minimum wage irrespective of whether the employers earned high or low profits. Here was a policy which could not only build the numerical strength of the unions beyond recognition, but would raise them to a new level of outlook and understanding. Limitation of the working day, which was the more important of the two demands, would lift the enervating burden of habitual overwork from millions of workers in general labour, in the great mass of still surviving sweatshops



and out-working establishments and in the factories where the employers were taking advantage of the surplus of labour and the fear of unemployment to enforce systematic overtime.

Marx had spoken twenty years earlier of the "immense physical, moral and intellectual benefits" accruing to the factory workers from the Ten-Hours Act they had won in 1848. (*Inaugural Address of the International Working Men's Association*, 1864.) And the shortening of hours is not only an actual improvement in the condition of the workers but the indispensable condition for their further political and cultural advance.

Further, the achievement of a *general* limitation of hours, as opposed to a limitation won by individual unions, requires "legislative interference", which can only come from political action. Marx had noted in connection with the Ten-Hours Act: "Without the working men's continuous pressure from without, that interference would never have taken place. But at all events, the result was not to be attained by private settlement between the working men and the capitalists. This very necessity of *general political action* affords the proof that in its merely economic action capital is the stronger side." (Marx, *Value, Price and Profit*.)

Here then, was the vital link between the growing forward movements in the political and trade union fields: we have already noted that the pioneers of working-class political independence, such as Keir Hardie, had taken the eight-hour day as a central slogan.

In addition to all these significant features of the eight-hours campaign, it was of historic importance in bringing a really mass movement in Britain into a powerful international movement, a development unknown since the International Workingmen's Association was at the height of its power in the sixties. The American workers had begun it soon after the Civil War, and the fight there was being waged with tremendous vigour in the mid-eighties: on May 1st, 1886, it was supported by nationwide strikes. The demand was taken up in Europe, where international trade union contacts were being renewed: a decision of the American Federation of Labour inspired the 1889 Paris Congress which reconstituted the Workers' International and issued the call for world-wide demonstrations on

May Day, 1890, with the Legal Eight-Hour Day as the central slogan.

It was to the task of reviving the trade unions on a class basis to fight for this broad inspiring policy that Mann, Burns and their comrades turned their inexhaustible energy and burning eloquence.

"How long, how long will you be content with the present half-hearted policy of your unions?" asked Mann in a pamphlet in 1886. "I readily grant that good work has been done in the past by the unions; but in Heaven's name, what good purpose are they serving now? All of them have large numbers out of employment even when their particular trade is busy. None of the important societies have any policy other than endeavouring to keep wages from falling. The true Unionist policy of *aggression* seems entirely lost sight of: in fact, the average unionist of to-day is a man of fossilised intellect, either hopelessly apathetic, or supporting a policy that plays directly into the hands of the capitalist exploiter. . . . I take my share in the work of the Trade Union to which I belong, but I candidly confess that unless it shows more vigour at the present time, I shall be compelled to take the view—against my will—that to continue to spend time over the ordinary squabble-investigating, do-nothing policy will be an unjustifiable waste of one's energies. I am sure there are thousands of others in my frame of mind."

In the middle and late 'eighties, therefore, a new, fighting spirit was growing among the working class, both organised and unorganised. The first historic break-through was made by the unskilled and hitherto unorganised workers of London, led by the socialists. In 1888, a strike by the bitterly exploited Bryant and May's match girls electrified the country. Mrs. Besant published a startling exposure of their conditions in *The Link* in July, and, to everyone's surprise, 700 girls came out on strike. Mrs. Besant and another socialist, Herbert Burrows, a civil servant, promptly organised them and collected £400 from the public, who had been shocked by the revelations of poverty and disease amid which the girls lived and worked. The London Trades Council negotiated a victorious settlement for the girls, though the victory was not immediately followed up.

Bigger forces went into action in the following spring, when Will Thorne, gasworker and secretary of the Canning Town

branch of the S.D.F. (he was later to be M.P. for West Ham for nearly forty years) decided to form a union to win the eight-hour day for the Gas Light and Coke Company's stokers, who were breaking their backs in twelve and eighteen hour shifts. A meeting was held, and on the morning of March 31st, 1889, the National Union of Gasworkers and General Labourers of Great Britain and Ireland was formed—later to become the National Union of General and Municipal Workers. Eight hundred men joined that day, the shilling entrance fees being collected in pails.

"The news of the meeting spread like wildfire," Thorne wrote later. "In the public houses, factories and works in Canning Town, Barking, East and West Ham, everyone was talking about the union. Sunday after Sunday we would start off from 144 Barking Road, our headquarters, to encourage the men at other gasworks. As many as twenty brake-loads of workers would go out on these Sunday morning crusades. The idea caught on; enthusiasm was at a high pitch, and within two weeks we had over 3,000 men in the union. Never before had men responded like they did. For months London was ablaze. The newspapers throughout the country were giving good reports of our activities. I kept in mind all the time my pledge to the men at the first meeting. To work and fight for the Eight-Hour Day—that was my first objective, soon to be won."

Faced with the threat of a crippling strike on the one hand and the competition of newfangled electric lighting on the other, the gas companies gave in without a struggle. The Gas Light and Coke Company, followed in the next few months by many provincial works, conceded the demand. The great surge of solidarity and confidence which had inspired the London men spread to all parts of the country. Gasworkers' unions or branches were formed in many places and all manner of unskilled and unorganised joined them. The initiative in this union building work was usually taken by Marxists, and most of the district organisers of the new union, which now became a power in the land, were or had been members of the S.D.F. or the Socialist League. Eleanor Marx, who had led a strike of Silvertown factory girls, was a member of the executive of the union, and Aveling drew up its constitution and rules.

The avalanche was now beginning. Hope was springing afresh in "that immense haunt of misery", East London, where

the rich merchandise from the four corners of the earth poured into the world's mightiest port to be handled by ragged dockers so starving that they fought for work and often had to knock off as soon as they had earned a few coppers—at 4*d.* or 5*d.* an hour—to buy food. To them, the victories of the match girls, many of whom were their own wives and daughters, and of the gas stokers, who worked with them seasonally in the docks, showed the way. For two years, Ben Tillett, one-time circus boy, shoemaker and sailor now turned warehouseman, who had founded the Tea Coopers' and General Labourers' Association, had been trying to get organised action, and the socialists had been carrying on propaganda at the dock gates. And then, suddenly, the revolt broke out in the docks. Men involved in a local dispute in the South West India Dock called in Tillett to lead them.

He had by now made contact with the socialists, and at once brought in Tom Mann, who, as Tillett wrote later, "threw himself into the work with all the courage and strength of a great body and brain." (Tillett, *Memories and Reflections*, 1931.) Also in the leadership were John Burns, of the S.D.F.; the giant Jim Toomey of the stevedores; Harry Orbell, a skilled worker who led the movement at Tilbury; and Eleanor Marx, who did the secretarial work. H. H. Champion was in charge of public relations, keeping informed the great mass of public opinion which regarded with warm sympathy this mighty revolt against abject poverty.

The strike soon gripped the whole of Thames-side, involving 30,000 dockers and over 30,000 other workers. The barriers between the different sections, particularly between organised and unorganised, were broken down: the stevedores and lightermen, who had strong unions, also joined the strike. Fifty miles of docks were picketed by 16,000 strikers, relief tickets were issued to ravenous thousands, huge marches with bands and banners were organised daily, vast meetings on Tower Hill were inspired by the fiery oratory of the leaders. Sympathy for the strikers spread literally round the world: the £50,000 contributed to the strike fund included £30,000 telegraphed from Australia at the time when things looked blackest and starving men were collapsing from exhaustion.

The welding into unity of the infinite variety of riverside workers is well shown in this description of a procession through

the City, with flags and banners lent by friendly and trade societies:

"There were burly stevedores, lightermen, ship painters, sailors and firemen, riggers, scrapers, engineers, shipwrights, permanent men got up respectably, preferables cleaned up to look like permanents, and unmistakable casuals with vari-coloured patches on their faded greenish garments; Foresters and Sons of the Phoenix in gaudy scarves; Doggett's prize winners, a stalwart battalion of watermen marching proudly in long scarlet coats, pink stockings and velvet caps, with huge pewter badges on their breasts; coalies in waggons fishing aggressively for coppers with bags tied to the end of poles; . . . skiffs mounted on wheels manned by stolid watermen; ballast heavers laboriously winding and tipping an empty basket; Father Neptune on his car in tinsel gown and flowing locks . . ." (H. Llewellyn Smith and V. Nash, *Story of the Dock Strike*, 1889.)

And finally, after dark hours in which it seemed that all the hope and enthusiasm, the struggle and sacrifice which had made this vast revolt against intolerable poverty, were to be crushed down once more, came victory, almost complete, symbolised by the "full, round, shining orb of the dockers' tanner".

"All strikes, turn-outs and lock-outs of the past must pale their ineffectual fires in the presence of the great revolt in the East End of London. . . . Not since the high and palmy days of Chartism have I witnessed any movement corresponding in importance and interest to the great strike of 1889", wrote the old Chartist leader, George Julian Harney, and all working-class Britain felt as he did.

But the victory on the Thames-side was more than an occasion for rejoicing. On a giant stage that could not be hidden it proved two of the great truths which were being propounded by the New Unionists: first that, whatever the "old fossils" might say, the unskilled could organise and could carry through an immense strike movement to victory; and secondly, that while the old policy was leading to disaster, the new could win not only immediate success but an incalculable raising of morale and expansion of numerical strength.

Throughout the length and breadth of the land, new forces were released by East London's example. In one year, the number of trade unionists in the country was more than

doubled—from about 860,000 in 1889 to just under two millions in 1890.

It is impossible here adequately to tell the story of the tumultuous years after 1889: the workers were on the move almost everywhere, in almost every grade and in almost every industry. There was so much to be done. Workers who had never been effectively organised—women, clerks, shop assistants, men in the transport and waterside industries and in the new factories making food, clothing and household goods; workers who had once been organised, but had fallen away in the economic depression, such as many of the builders and miners; workers in new and rising industries, such as steel and electrical work—all these and many more formed new unions or brought strength flooding into the old ones. Many of the unions we know to-day were founded in the years 1888 to 1892, and the same is true of many trades councils, which were of incalculable value as rallying points, not only industrial but also political, for the local stalwarts upon whom so much responsibility fell in this time of expansion and advance.

For, though the first victories of the New Unionism were won by the unskilled, it spread to the entire movement. The miners, as we have seen, entered the 'eighties in an appalling state of disorganisation, and further defeats were suffered by the local associations in ensuing years. The lesson was long and bitter, but the miners learned it. "Out of their experience of sectional operations and conflicting policies there began to grow amongst the younger miners the idea of a single nationwide organisation, federally uniting the coal-fields for every trade union purpose." (Arnot, *op. cit.*, p. 80.) Pressure for the new ideas—in which Ben Pickard of Yorkshire played an important part—grew through the decade. In 1887, a miners' conference declared for the Legal Eight-Hour Day, despite the opposition of the Northumberland and Durham men. Out of a powerful and successful wages movement begun in 1888, there emerged in November, 1889, the Miners' Federation of Great Britain. This organisation, the formation of which was a historic step not only for the miners but for the whole working class, took as its field of work both industrial and legislative matters and aimed to obtain the eight-hour day from bank to bank for all underground workers. The new spirit of solidarity was shown in Rule 20, which declared that when any district

was attacked on wages or any action taken by a general conference, all members of the Federation, with the approval of a special conference, should tender notices. By the following spring, with a new wages victory won, the Federation turned its full attention to the eight-hour day.

For the engineers, the logical sequel of their determined defence of the nine hours in the 'seventies was the eight-hour day, and in the 'eighties there were years of discussion within the society upon the wider implications of the New Unionism, particularly on the question of improving conditions by legislation. Mann and Burns however, rallied the younger members, and by 1890, the society had declared for the eight-hour day and parliamentary action. Next year, Mann almost won the secretaryship of this old craft society. In 1892, as a result of the same pressure, the society was reorganised and its base was broadened by opening full membership to wider sections of the industry.

Meanwhile, the organisation of the unskilled was sweeping the country irresistibly. The Gasworkers' and General Labourers' Union spread all over Britain and into Ireland. The Dock, Wharf, Riverside and General Labour Union, led by Mann and Burns, ran like wildfire from London to the East Coast ports, into Eastern Scotland, along the South Coast, and to Bristol and Wales. A vast new dockers' union, led by socialist and progressive Irish leaders, disciples of Davitt, grew up in Merseyside, Clydeside and Northern Ireland. Hitherto negligible and struggling societies, like those of the woollen workers in the West Riding, again under militant leadership, now represented real masses of workers. The Sailors' and Firemen's Union, founded in 1887, recruited 65,000 members in two years. Among the railway workers, long weak in organisation and desperately exploited, the General Railway Workers' Union took its place beside the weakly Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants.

Engels summed up the importance of the new movement—examples of its impact could be multiplied a thousandfold—when he declared:

"The new unions were founded at a time when the faith in the eternity of the wages system was severely shaken; their founders and promoters were Socialists, either consciously or by feeling; the masses, whose adhesion gave them strength,

were rough, neglected, looked down upon by the working-class aristocracy; but they had this immense advantage, that their minds were virgin soil, entirely free from the inherited respectable bourgeois prejudices which hampered the brains of the better situated 'old' unionists. And thus we see these unions taking the lead of the working class generally, and more and more taking in tow the rich and proud 'old' unions. . . . The people are now putting their shoulders to the wheel in quite a different way, they are drawing into the struggle far greater masses, shaking up society far more profoundly, and bringing forward far more radical demands: the eight-hour day, a general federation of all organisations and complete solidarity. . . . The people look on their immediate demands only as provisional although they themselves do not yet know towards what goal they are working. But this vague idea has sunk in sufficiently deeply to make them elect as leaders *only* known Socialists." (Engels to Sorge, December 7th, 1889, quoted Hutt, *This Final Crisis*, p. 119.)

Symbolic of the restless surge of these epoch-making days was London's first May Day demonstration in 1890. Through the 'eighties, the British Labour Movement had been renewing its international contacts both in individual industries and on a national scale. In 1888, the Second International was founded at a meeting attended by representatives of the British socialists and trade unionists, and it launched a great campaign for the eight-hour day. This demand was now taken up by the socialist group associated with Engels as the basis for carrying on the movement in Britain to the next step, the formation of a Socialist Party based upon the mass of the working class.

A central committee was set up, including representatives of the Bloomsbury Socialist Society, some radical clubs and the Gasworkers' Union who had lost their recently won eight-hour day, and a great Eight-Hour Day Demonstration, as part of the international movement, was planned for May Day, 1890. The "old" union leaders of the London Trades Council tried to take control, but these preliminary squabbles were lost in the vast demonstration of hundreds of thousands which poured through London to Hyde Park on May 4th.

"It seemed as though the whole population of London poured parkwards", said one contemporary report. One thing the processions showed was the way in which all classes of workers joined hands on the eight hours. There were dockers there in their rough working clothes, kid-gloved, top-hatted gentlemen



compositors, East End working girls in their feathers and finery. (*The Star*, May 5th, 1890, quoted Hobsbawm, *op. cit.*, p. 111.) It was the "grandest and most important part" of the May Day festival in all Europe, wrote Engels in the Vienna *Arbeiterzeitung*. "The grandchildren of the old Chartists are entering the line of battle."

The powerful popular movement soon had an unmistakable impact on the T.U.C. There, the new forces, whose main spokesman was Keir Hardie, had been battling with the old leadership, chiefly on the issue of the eight-hour day. As usual, the "Old Gang", headed by the stonemason, Henry Broadhurst, blackguarded the spokesmen of the new unionism and used all their resources of delay and sabotage to prevent this great popular demand from making itself felt. But history was against them.

New men now appeared at congresses, representing hundreds of thousands of workers who had been organised and led to victory by the socialists and militants. The engineers, carpenters and joiners, miners, and even Broadhurst's own union, the stonemasons, voted for the Legal Eight Hours. The new-born Miners' Federation led the attack on the old leadership, and in 1890 swept them away. Of sixty resolutions passed, forty-five were of the kind which only the socialists had put forward two years earlier. One declared for the Legal Eight-Hour Day, the central demand of the new forces, which in the immediately following years maintained and extended their supremacy. The 1894 Congress, on the proposal of Keir Hardie, declared in favour of the nationalisation of industry.

In reviewing the great upsurge of these years as a whole, however, it should be noted that the leadership of the socialist parties did not plan the work of their militant and progressive members within the trade unions. The attitude of the leaders of the S.D.F. towards the unions remained sectarian. The Socialist League had collapsed, and its remnant was being reduced to zero by the anarchists who had captured it. The Fabian Society, which gained some ground at this time, was far more interested in "permeating" the Liberal Party than in organising anybody.

Fortunately, as we have seen, many individual members of the S.D.F. had a clearer understanding of Marxist practice than Hyndman, and it was due to them that the New Unionism

was almost everywhere under the leadership of socialists. Nevertheless, it was a grave weakness that these socialists acted as individuals and not as members of a party or group with a clear policy. Some of them, like Tom Mann, overcame this weakness because they had learned the lessons of the class struggle well. Others, like John Burns, did not, and soon found themselves drifting into careerism, opportunism and unprincipled alliances with the "Old Gang" of the T.U.C. and the middle-class politicians in Parliament and the London County Council. Within a short time, Burns was well on the way to a post in the Liberal Government of 1906. And the efforts after the May Day demonstration of the group round Engels to establish a permanent party by broadening the Eight-Hours Committee (renamed the Legal Eight Hours and Emancipation of Labour League) met with no permanent success.

## *2. Political Awakening*

The movement for working-class independence in politics was given tremendous new weight and impetus by the victories on the trade union front. The hard experience of the strikes had proved to Liberal workers that Liberal employers were as bad as any other kind of employers. Bryant and Mays were pillars of the Liberal Party; so were the shipowners against whom the new Seamen's and Firemen's Union battled; and so were the owners of the Manningham Mills in Bradford, who in 1891 smashed the strike of their workers.

London was no longer the centre of the scene: that had now moved to the industrial North: socialism and independent politics were ceasing to be the concern solely of the small groups with their headquarters in the metropolis but were being taken up by the working class proper. And the provincial members of the S.D.F. and the Fabian Society and the Socialist League, actively engaged in real popular struggles, were thereby released from the trammels of Hyndman's sectarianism and Fabian intrigue in the Liberal Party. Indeed, the search for a socialist outlook took many workers into branches of the Fabian Society, which was thus blessed with a membership in some places whose background and aspirations was in marked contrast to that of the middle-class London leadership.

Out of these experiences and out of this fusion of socialist ideas with the mass movement came a remarkable growth of

political activity, organisations and publications. An outstanding example of many such developments was the formation of the Bradford Labour Union, the most powerful of the local organisations in the North which also shows clearly the synthesis of political and industrial activity. One of the biggest battles of the New Unionism was the Leeds gasworkers' strike of 1890. Here, Will Thorne and Pete Curran of the Gasworkers' Union were assisted by the Socialist League groups in Bradford and Leeds. Soon there followed the bitter struggle at the Manningham Mills, after which the strike leader, W. H. Drew, supported again by members and former members of the League—including the future cabinet minister, Fred Jowett—was able to establish an independent organisation, the Labour Union. The success of this organisation sprang from the awakening of the workers and their growing interest in public affairs. Vital to its success was *The Yorkshire Factory Times*, founded in 1889 and edited by Joseph Burgess, a Lancashire cotton piecer. The union adopted candidates for two of Bradford's three constituencies—Tillett, and Robert Blatchford, a brilliant Manchester journalist, who was soon to be writing for a new paper aimed at a wider public, *The Workman's Times* to which Burgess transferred, and to found *The Clarion*, the most famous of the independent Labour pioneering papers. These moves were in turn followed by the formation by Blatchford of the Manchester Independent Labour Party out of the local Fabians, the S.D.F., the Trades Council and the Labour Church.

The movement for Labour independence was gathering weight and momentum and its prospects of appearing on the political scene in real force seemed bright. Independent Labour candidates, no longer tied to the apron strings of the Liberal Party, but socialists, stood against Liberals and won, or forced themselves on Liberal constituency organisations "at the point of the sword", as Engels put it. Thus, in the General Election of 1892, Burns, supported by his Labour Union, was elected at Battersea, Keir Hardie for West Ham South, and the seamen's leader, Havelock Wilson, for Middlesbrough, while Tillett polled just under 3,000 against the Liberal's 3,300 in Bradford.

Indeed, had there been a national Labour Party in existence in 1892, it is quite possible that it would have won a number of seats. Unfortunately, the weakness of the socialist movement did more harm here than it did in the trade union field. The

sectarianism of the national leadership of the S.D.F. made it ineffective, while the Fabians, their eyes on the Liberal Party, actively discouraged the development of working-class political independence, which would ruin their favourite schemes. Hardie was unable to pull the movement together; he did try hard to get Burns to take a more active general interest, but by this time the London man had fish of his own to fry. Thus, the workers did not go into the election as an army, but as a number of isolated local detachments. In the end, though three independent Labour M.Ps. were elected, Hardie was left by Wilson and Burns as the sole standard-bearer of the new ideas.

Nevertheless, the drive for a national independent Labour Party was going ahead, fostered by Burgess through *The Workman's Times*, and independent labour organisations were established in a number of places, including London. At last, early in 1893, the Independent Labour Party was formed, the foundation conference taking place, significantly, not in London, but at Bradford, now the home of a vigorous and many-sided local movement. Delegates of every shade of socialist and independent labour opinion were present, including G. B. Shaw for the Fabian leadership, James Macdonald for the S.D.F., and Aveling, who represented the Legal Eight Hours League and reported for the committee which prepared the new party's constitution. By far the greatest number, however, came from the North of England or Scotland—a third came from Yorkshire labour organisations. In addition, there were a few from Northern Fabian Societies and Lancashire branches of the S.D.F., though the Federation itself refused to join the new organisation. The programme adopted gave first place to the eight-hour day, followed by various economic and social reforms, with finally the "collective ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange".

Keir Hardie, who presided at the conference, was the main founder and leader of the I.L.P., as he was later to be of the Labour Party. The son of an unsuccessful Ayrshire carpenter, he went into the mines at the age of ten, and at a very youthful age became, as we have seen, a miners' leader in Lanarkshire and Ayrshire. Politically, he began, like so many other working-class leaders of the time, as a temperance advocate and a Liberal-Radical, but in the 'eighties realised the need for an

independent party and was influenced by the socialist propaganda of the S.D.F., though he did not join the Federation. After founding the Scottish Labour Party, he had campaigned single-mindedly for five years for the formation of the I.L.P., ceaselessly fighting the Liberals and Fabians who opposed this aim. He was an M.P. from 1892 to 1895 and was elected again in 1900. From the later 'nineties he fought for a common organisation, under socialist leadership, of trade unions and socialists, and if possible an even broader united front against imperialism based upon it.

Hardie, a fine speaker and journalist, was above all an incorruptible and splendid fighter for the cause of the workers as he saw it. But he had no clear political theory to guide him: one of his biggest weaknesses was his deliberate refusal to understand Marxism. While in his intentions he was utterly devoted to the working class, Keir Hardie from the very beginning frequently wavered between bold championship of their cause—particularly in exposing the horrors of capitalist exploitation—and quite unprincipled parliamentary opportunism. At the start of his career as a national figure, he symbolised his class, appearing at the House of Commons not in the usual top-hatted uniform of an M.P., but in a worker's cloth cap, and accompanied by a cornet player. Single-handed he protested when the House congratulated the Prince of Wales on the birth of the present Duke of Windsor but forgot the mining disaster at Pontypridd which had killed 251 miners the night before. He opposed the Boer War and the Imperialist War of 1914: the failure of international Social-Democracy to oppose the latter and the willingness of most of the Labour Party to support it, broke his heart.

The foundation of the I.L.P. was an important advance. Engels greeted it with approval.

"The S.D.F. on the one hand and the Fabians on the other have not been able, with their sectarian attitude, to absorb the rush towards Socialism in the provinces, so the formation of a third party was quite a good thing. But the rush now has become so great especially in the industrial areas of the North, that the new party came out already at this first congress stronger than the S.D.F. or the Fabians, if not stronger than both put together. And as the *mass* of the membership is certainly very good, as the centre of gravity lies in the provinces and not in London, the

home of cliques, and as the main point of the programme is the same as ours, Aveling was right in joining and accepting a seat on the Executive.

"If the petty private ambitions of the London would-be-greats are held somewhat in check here and its tactics do not turn out *too* wrongheaded, the Independent Labour Party may succeed in detaching the masses from the Social Democratic Federation and in the provinces, from the Fabians too, thus forcing unity." (Engels to Sorge, January 18th, 1893, quoted *Marx and Engels on Britain*, p. 531.)

Of the leaders he wrote:

"The majority of the best of them . . . are not strangers to an inclination to intrigue, closely bound up with the Parliamentary régime; but behind them stand the masses, who will either teach them decency or throw them overboard." (Engels to Sorge, March 18th, 1893, quoted *Briefe und Auszüge*, Stuttgart, 1906).

The strength of the party lay in that working-class political awakening, which found at once an expression and a stimulus in the propaganda of such writers as Blatchford, whose pamphlet, *Merrie England*, sold three-quarters of a million copies in its first year (1892) and did perhaps more than any other single publication to create a socialist consciousness among the working class.

But the I.L.P. had grave weaknesses which prevented it from becoming the British workers' socialist party.

First, while it had made some advance in pulling together the various strands of working-class political thought and organisation (remnants of the Socialist League were absorbed, many provincial Fabian Societies became I.L.P. branches, and the Scottish Labour Party, whose membership was absorbed, was wound up in 1894), it had not united all the socialist groups. The London Fabian Society stayed out, though the majority of the party's first executive were members of London or provincial Fabian Societies.

And the S.D.F., which in the 'nineties was gaining ground in London and Lancashire, would not participate, though its branches often worked together in comradely fashion with those of the I.L.P. Indeed, the rank and file of the parties were overwhelmingly in favour of fusion of the two organisations, as was shown by the majority of five to one in favour of this course in a poll of 6,000 members of the S.D.F. and the I.L.P. in 1897.

But the leadership of the I.L.P., including Hardie, were strongly opposed to such a step on the ground that the goodwill of the trade unions might be lost. The membership of the I.L.P. was then ballotted separately on the question of fusion or federation, with the proviso that fusion must have the support of three-quarters of the membership to be effective. There was a majority for federation, but the S.D.F. would not accept this, and so negotiations broke down.

Further, jealousies and personal ambitions kept some Labour leaders aloof from the I.L.P. For instance, while Mann backed the party with his tremendous drive and understanding of mass movements (he became secretary in 1894), Burns was hostile and formed an alliance with the "Old Gang" of the T.U.C. Parliamentary Committee, of which body he was awarded the chairmanship.

The second weakness of the I.L.P. at this stage was that its support was localised, being chiefly concentrated in the textile districts of Yorkshire. It was weak in London, and among some large and important groups of workers, such as the English and Welsh miners, it had no strength at all for some years.

Thirdly, the I.L.P. was too loosely organised: the local branches, which were virtually independent, were held together by little more than the personality of leading speakers who toured the country, notably Keir Hardie, whose prestige was high in the mid-nineties, and such newspapers as *The Labour Leader*, which Hardie began to publish from London as well as Glasgow, and *The Clarion*.

Fourthly, the party's early years coincided with the end of the Great Depression and the beginning of the first phase of the imperialist boom, which brought a temporary ebbing of the tide of working-class advance. I.L.P. candidates at elections did increasingly badly, and none were elected at the 1895 General Election, when even Hardie was defeated, losing his seat at West Ham. On the other hand, an increasing number of Independent Labour candidates were successful in municipal elections, especially in Yorkshire and Scotland. This was also true of the S.D.F., which under the leadership of Will Thorne won in West Ham in 1893 the first Labour council majority in our history.

But the greatest weakness of the I.L.P. lay in the fact that its theory was confused and vague. Above all, it rejected Marxism;

although its basic impulse came from the growing political awareness of the workers, it repudiated the idea of class struggle.

The ideological strength and weakness of the I.L.P. is well exemplified by *Merrie England*. In stirring yet homely terms, Blatchford explained what socialism would mean.

"I would make all land, mills, mines, factories, works, shops and railways the property of the people", he wrote. "I would make the railways, the carriage of letters and the transit of goods as free as the roads and bridges. . . . I would institute public dining halls, public baths; public wash houses on the best plans and so set free the hands of those slaves—our English women. I would have all children fed and clothed and educated at the cost of the State. I would have them all taught to play and sing. I would have them all trained to athletics and to arms. I would have public halls of science. I would have the people become their own artists, actors, musicians, soldiers and police. Then, by degrees, I would make all these things free."

Blatchford drew a distinction—based on their different social and economic nature—between socialist and communist society (he called them "Elementary" and "Advanced" Socialism respectively) which was brilliant in its lucidity and simplicity and in its prophecy that one must succeed the other.

His onslaught on capitalism is trenchant, his dream of the future is inspiring; but his answer to the problem of policy shared the weakness of that given by the other pioneer socialist organisations.

"The first thing to do", he wrote, "is to educate the people in Socialism. Let us once get the people to understand and desire Socialism, and I am sure *we may very safely leave them to secure it*. (Our emphasis—G.T.) The most useful work which Socialists can do at present is the work of education and organisation. Socialism will not come by means of a sudden *coup*. It will grow naturally out of our surroundings, and will develop naturally and by degrees. But its growth and development may be materially hastened." (*Merrie England*, 1908 edition, p. 128.)

Here again was the emphasis on propaganda alone, which, as we have seen, was shared by the Socialist League and the leaders of the S.D.F., though in this case it was not intended to lead to a revolutionary social change, but to hasten a form of social organisation which would "grow up naturally out of our surroundings". Such a conception presented in a new context



and a more advanced form the basic theory of the Fabians that socialism could be achieved by pushing forward Liberal opinion to piece-meal reforms of the abuses of capitalism. It was in fundamental conflict not only with the infantile insurrectionary ideas ("a sudden coup") which were presented as the alternative, but, more significantly, with the idea of real working-class political independence in the struggle for socialism, growing stronger and more conscious in day to day activity. Overlaid as it was by a glowing religious fervour which the I.L.P. inherited from Methodist and other influences in the working class, this theoretical weakness gave growing scope for middle-class reformism: Liberal demagogues such as Ramsay MacDonald rubbed shoulders with honest but not very clear-minded working-class militants.

The Fabians, who had poured cold water on the idea of independence, had to adjust themselves to the plain fact that the workers were trying to form their own party; a new feature had appeared on the political scene. If the workers could no longer be tied to Liberalism, the Fabians, by extending their "permeation" tactics to a new field, must ensure that the new party did not move along revolutionary paths. On the basis of their experience in London local government and of their researches into trade unionism and social problems, the London Fabians (almost all of the provincial societies had been absorbed in the I.L.P.) developed and elaborated their reformist theory.

Their aim was not to arouse and inspire the masses, but to influence the new generation of working-class politicians and trade union officials. Outstanding examples of their work were the tracts for councillors, published just at the time when the I.L.P. was beginning to venture into this field. A few years later, they established jointly with the I.L.P. a Local Government Information Bureau. In the trade union sphere, the Webbs' *History of Trade Unionism* (1894) and *Industrial Democracy* (1898), through their massive scholarship, became standard works.

Thus, when the great upsurge of the late 'eighties and early 'nineties began to die away, the old ideas of bourgeois Liberal reformism reasserted themselves in a form more suitable to the level which the movement, both political and industrial, had now reached.

It was to be a Fabian boast that they had defeated Marxism in the struggle for the intellectual leadership of the labour movement, and from what has gone before it is easy to see that one of the major factors responsible for this defeat was the sectarianism of the S.D.F., its general weakness in the application of Marxist theory to day to day activity. But the S.D.F. was stronger than the I.L.P. in that it *had* an independent working-class theory and that its members were expected to study and understand it.

George Lansbury later recalled how he joined the S.D.F. branch in Bow and Bromley, the "cockpit of socialism" in East London:

"Our branch was about 40 strong. We were all in good jobs, all very enthusiastic and convinced our mission was to revolutionise the world. . . . Our branch meetings were like revivalist gatherings. We opened with a song and closed with one, and often read together some extracts from economic and historical writings. . . . We were all very dogmatic and prided ourselves on our knowledge of economics. We ran an economic study class under Comrade Hazell and wearily struggled with *Das Kapital* and Engels' *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*. My wife, though heavily burdened with a large family and small income, attended the branch meetings and the economics class." (G. Lansbury, *Looking Backwards and Forwards*.)

It was because this enthusiasm and devotion to socialism of the S.D.F., particularly of its rank and file, was based upon a really independent and comprehensive theory, that the S.D.F. proved a much tougher organism than the I.L.P., enabling it to gain strength during the later 'nineties when the less favourable political climate created difficulties for the I.L.P. With all its defects, the S.D.F. was the most thoroughly socialist organisation in the country, and the mid-nineties saw not only the reconciliation with Morris but the growth within the Federation of pressure for a more co-operative attitude towards the trade unions: in 1896 James Macdonald became secretary of the London Trades Council.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE ORIGINS AND EARLY YEARS OF THE LABOUR PARTY

#### 1. *The Employers Counter-Attack*

THE immediate origins of the Labour Party are to be found in the consequences of the employers' counter-attack upon the rapidly developing labour movement, the evolution of which we have just outlined. They had been caught off balance by the great upsurge, but began to hit back almost as soon as they had lost the first battles.

They turned first on the new unions of unskilled. Before 1889 was out, the South Metropolitan Gas Company in London, at the cost of £100,000, smashed the union there and abolished the eight-hour day. Fortunately, the victorious fight of the gas-workers at Leeds a few months later prevented the attack from spreading to the rest of the country.

A more serious challenge, however, came from the wealthiest body of capitalists, the great shipowners. They had formed "rings" and price-fixing associations from as early as 1875, and now set up a Shipping Federation with the main purpose of smashing the unions of seamen and waterside workers, whose pioneer struggles had turned ports like London, Cardiff and Hull almost into closed-shop towns. A lock-out in Cardiff smashed the unions. A series of partial attacks in London pushed them back. Then in 1892-3 came a slump, and with it an all-out offensive by the employers: a great lock-out in Hull destroyed the unions there. All over the country, big business trade associations and "rings" took up the weapon of the systematic lock-out to smash the unions.

By 1893, it is probably true to say that most of the "unskilled" and general unions of 1889 were mere shadows of what they had been, and lucky to escape total annihilation. Effective organisation among the dockers, for example, was wiped out in the major ports, and most of the ground won had to be regained in the great strikes of 1911. Fortunately, however, the unskilled unions were not completely wiped out. They retained,

at any rate, a cadre of militant leaders who kept on criss-crossing the country in organising and propagandist campaigns, seizing every opportunity to build union strength. So there were always some districts or some industrial groups which remained centres of strong organisation in unions such as those of the Dockers or Gasworkers. The basis for the next advance was never lost.

Next, the employers turned upon stronger and more seasoned enemies; but here they were stopped. The cotton workers, for example, resisted a major wage reduction in a twenty-weeks strike. Above all, a general lock-out of the Miners' Federation, the employers demanding a 25 per cent. cut in wages, failed in 1893.

The mine-owners had secured a 10 per cent. reduction in Durham the previous year, when terrible hardships were inflicted on the men and their families, but this only had the effect of strengthening the workers' unity—the Durham men immediately joined the Federation. And now week after week, month after month, the men of Yorkshire, Lancashire and the Midlands stayed out, while the womenfolk, helped by the co-operatives, struggled heroically to keep the households going. And hunger was not the only enemy: police and troops were brought into the mining areas, and at Featherstone, Yorkshire, two men were killed and sixteen wounded when the troops opened fire. Great was the indignation throughout the country: in London an effigy of the Liberal Home Secretary, H. H. Asquith, with death's head and cross bones, was carried to Trafalgar Square.

In the end, the stubborn strength of the miners forced the Government to intervene: for the first time in history, a leading Cabinet Minister, Lord Rosebery, officially stepped in to settle a dispute—and the men went back in triumph on their old wages. Thomas Ashton, secretary of the M.F.G.B. at the time, later recalled: "There was great rejoicing throughout the country on the night of the settlement. Men, women and children of the working classes in the districts directly affected joined the miners in their rejoicing with singing, dancing, shouting, laughing and crying for joy, and in several districts the church bells were set ringing to celebrate the great event." (Quoted Arnot, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 252.)

The movement had beaten off a major assault, thus proving

its growing strength and unity. Nevertheless, the defeat of the new unions had an effect on the balance of forces within the trade union movement. The unskilled workers, who, free from the prejudice and caution of the old craft unions, had led the way in the great upsurge, by the mid-nineties formed only a small part of the expanded movement—about 100,000 out of a total of over 1,500,000: and half of this total consisted of miners, cotton workers and engineers—the three big industries in which trade unionism had long been established.

Thus while the new movement for militant action and political independence was at its height, the old unionists with their ingrained ideas of Liberalism and class-collaboration and deeply entrenched particularly in the leadership of the unions, now took their cue from the employers and began to strike back. The new ideas had spread to their own organisations, and at the 1894 T.U.C. when Tom Mann stood for the secretaryship he got about a third of the votes, and he himself estimated that eighty of the 370 delegates were members of the I.L.P.

The "Old Gang" had long been striving to reassert their leadership. The slump and the defeat of the new unions strengthened their position; they were able to use the internal jealousies of the progressive leadership, notably that of the ambitious John Burns towards Keir Hardie, to split the militant forces. They won over the leadership of such unions as the miners, whose rank and file, having proved their strength, were inclined to be tolerant of the manoeuvres of their leaders. In 1895 the "Old Gang" made their big coup. The parliamentary committee on its own authority drew up new standing orders for the T.U.C.; trades councils, the strongholds of the rank and file militants, were excluded from the T.U.C., as were delegates "not working at their trade"—that is people like Keir Hardie who were now engaged in full-time politics or political journalism. Finally, the block vote was introduced, thereby greatly strengthening the position of the full-time officials. As a result of these anti-democratic measures which were imposed quite arbitrarily upon the congress, the "Old Gang," notably the Tory James Mawdsley of the Cotton Spinners and Robert Knight of the Boilermakers, an exponent of extreme class-collaboration, came back into the saddle.

But constitutional manipulations, while they were effective in hampering the growth of the living forces of the trade union

movement, by silencing the voices of Keir Hardie and of workers moving towards socialism, could not alter the trend of economic development or the bitter, sustained onslaught of the employers. In the last years of the century, as we have already noted, Britain was emerging from the Great Depression, and in the hectic booms which followed now and in the years before the Great War of 1914-18, the finance capitalist and monopolist trends which had been maturing began to assume a dominating position in the economy, with the ceaseless growth of trade associations, rings, cartels and trusts. Though the boom might mean temporarily a new lease of life for the aristocracy of labour, important sections of industry felt the full effect of profound technical change. The employers, full of revived confidence, and inspired by the example of ferocious onslaught which the American capitalists had unleashed on the unions in the early 'nineties, now turned their attack, not upon the new unions, or even on those which had been revived and strengthened in the upsurge, but upon the very core of the old craft unionism.

The battle of the giants was fought in the engineering industry. In 1896 was formed the Employers' Federation of Engineering Associations, absorbing existing associations in Northern England, Northern Ireland and Scotland, and taking as its objective "to protect and defend the interests of employers against combinations of workmen". Colonel H. Dyer, managing director of Armstrong-Whitworths, was elected president. Every local dispute was referred to the Federation and the threat of the lock-out was repeatedly held at the heads of the workers. At the same time both the militancy and the membership of the A.S.E. were growing, and events were rapidly moving towards a full-scale trial of strength.

The main issue was the question of the replacement of craftsmen by cheap, unorganised labour on the new machines, but the conflict began over the eight-hour day, not in the North, but in London. Early in 1897 many London firms conceded the forty-eight-hour week, but meanwhile the Federation had got a foothold there, establishing a branch with Siemens, the German industrialist, as president. The union refused to recognise this body, and sent strike notices to the firms which had refused shorter hours. The Federation then stepped in to say that this was a national question, and that if

the strike went forward they would lock out all unionists in every federated firm in the country, in batches of 25 per cent. per week. When this threat was carried out, 17,000 A.S.E. members and several thousands from other unions left work.

The struggle was now one of the major national issues of the day, and in the intense clash of argument that accompanied it the employers made a central issue of their "right to do what they like with their own," namely the machines. Siemens went so far as to declare openly that the object of the lock-out was "to get rid of trade unionism altogether"—as indeed the union had not been slow to point out. No holds were barred in this fierce onslaught on trade unionism: an army of black-legs was recruited by the so-called "Free Labour Association", which had been founded by the employers four years earlier. As month after month went by, the unions felt the financial strain, though this was relieved to some extent by public subscription and donations from other unions both at home and abroad: continental and colonial unions subscribed over £28,000; more than half of this came from Germany, and Eleanor Marx was specially thanked for her assistance in this matter. In the autumn, however, the employers extended the lock-out and the strain became intolerable, despite all the outside help and the big conference called by the London Trades Council with a view to organising further assistance. In the new year, the employers' terms were accepted. These were, in brief: there was to be no interference in management; every employer was to be allowed to introduce piece-work; collective bargaining was allowed; union members were forbidden to interfere with the wages of workers outside their own unions; the employers claimed the right to appoint the men and determine the conditions for working the machines; and finally, machinery for avoiding disputes was established. A real defeat had been suffered, but it was not of overwhelming proportions; indeed, the result of the struggle was in part a victory—the attempt to destroy the unions had utterly failed.

The engineers' was the biggest struggle of these years, but it was by no means the only one. In South Wales the miners, who had taken little part in the new unionism, now, moving at last under the influence of the untiring efforts of William Brace (a Monmouthshire miners' agent and a stalwart of the M.F.G.B.), began to turn against the sliding scale and towards

the formation of a real union. After years of internal struggle against the old ideas of such men as William Abraham ("Mabon"), the Welsh miners gave notice in 1897 to end the sliding scale agreement and at the same time demanded a ten per cent. wage increase. The owners, aiming to smash the new movement, replied by giving notice of a lock-out and refusing to negotiate except with the small group of workmen's representatives with plenary powers: there were to be no conferences or ballot votes. Such terms were overwhelmingly rejected. Without funds of their own, though supported by the M.F.G.B. and the other coalfields, the miners were locked out for five months and were forced to return to work defeated, compelled still to accept the sliding scale.

"But the struggle had not been in vain. In the course of these months of suffering, the spirit of trade unionism had been fully recreated in the valleys of Monmouth and Glamorgan. From this year, 1898, the South Wales Miners' Federation dates its true foundation. It now dealt with wages questions and took the place of the old Sliding Scale Committee." (Arnot, *op. cit.*, p. 286.) Early next year, the Welshmen were admitted to the M.F.G.B.

The employers had more strings to their bow than the lock-out and "free labour". There was also the law. In the mid-nineties, the idea of amending the trade union legislation began to be canvassed, and in the last years of the century a series of decisions by the courts began dangerously to whittle away the fundamental trade union rights embodied in the legislation of the 'seventies: the rights to picket or, in certain circumstances, to strike were now called in question. This tendency reached its climax in the Taff Vale decision of 1901, awarding the Taff Vale Railway Company £20,000 damages against the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants for losses sustained during a strike. As long as this judgment stood, effective trade unionism was plainly impossible. The employers, backed by the state, seemed to have won the day.

This impression, however, was quite wrong. Though the employers had indeed made a great deal of headway, they had failed decisively to weaken either the strength of the unions or the much smaller strength of the socialists. They had, on the other hand, forced all sections of the labour movement, "old" and "new", socialist and anti-socialist, into a common front



for the defence of the basic rights of labour. Life itself was teaching the broad trade union movement the need for united, political action such as the socialists advocated. And because the facts proved them right, the socialists regained ground. For instance, the great struggle in South Wales converted many miners from liberalism to the I.L.P., and in 1900, Keir Hardie was elected M.P. for Merthyr Tydfil. The campaign for a general fighting federation of all trades, put forward by *The Clarion* in the mid-nineties, gained wider support for the socialists in the T.U.C. A General Federation of Trade Unions, intended, in view of the recent bitter experience of the engineers' lock-out, as a mutual insurance organisation, was in fact set up in 1898, and such an important union as the Engineers' joined it; but the sabotage of the "Old Gang" made it ineffective.

The general situation, too, was having important effects upon the various trends in working-class politics: the heady tide of jingoism which accompanied the repeated colonial wars and international crises of the imperialist epoch tended on the whole to make the socialists and radicals draw together for mutual defence. For example, during the South African War Keir Hardie was in charge of the stewards at Glasgow who fought off jingo mobs who attacked a meeting addressed by Lloyd George, the Radical-Liberal leader, and in London, at the same time, the S.D.F. and the radicals had an agreement for the defence of anti-war meetings. Really profound anti-imperialist thought and research were now developed, such as the work of J. A. Hobson, which was so highly appreciated by Lenin. On the other hand, most of the Fabians were either indifferent to this burning issue, or actually supported imperialist expansion. Blatchford too now differed from the bulk of the I.L.P. in supporting the Government.

The overall situation in the labour movement was thus becoming more favourable for the idea, which Hardie and his friends had been developing for some years, of some form of alliance between the trade unions and the socialist societies. The first steps towards the realisation of such a plan were taken by the Scottish T.U.C., which had been set up as a protest against the new standing orders and on whose parliamentary committee the I.L.P. had a majority, including Robert Smillie, the miners' leader.

In April, 1899, the Scottish T.U.C. gave its parliamentary

committee power to call a special congress "to decide upon united working-class action at the next General Election". In January the following year, this special conference, attended by delegates of trade unions, trade councils, the S.D.F., I.L.P. and of co-operative societies, set up a Scottish Workers' Parliamentary Committee to carry out its resolution for independent working-class representation.

A resolution put before the British T.U.C. for 1899 by the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants with the strong support of Hardie and *The Labour Leader* recommended a similar line of procedure. It read:

"That this Congress, having regard to its decisions in former years, and with a view to securing a better representation of the interest of Labour in the House of Commons, hereby instructs the Parliamentary Committee to invite the co-operation of all the co-operative, socialistic, trade union and other working-class organisations to jointly co-operate on lines mutually agreed upon in convening a special Congress of representatives from such of the above-named organisations as may be willing to take part to devise ways and means for the securing of an increased number of Labour members in the next Parliament."

In a long, intense debate at the congress, the proposal was opposed by the miners, who thought that each union should put up its own candidates, and the cotton workers who argued that such a political venture would split their society. Despite this powerful opposition, however, the resolution was carried by 546,000 votes to 434,000, amid the ringing cheers of its supporters.

## 2. *The Labour Representation Committee*

The convening committee of the Labour Representation Committee consisted of four representatives of the T.U.C. Parliamentary Committee and two for each of the three socialist organisations. The T.U.C. delegates were Sam Woods, of the Miners, a Lib-Lab M.P. for Walthamstow; W. C. Steadman, a Fabian bargebuilder and M.P. for Stepney; Will Thorne, of the Gasworkers and the S.D.F.; and Richard Bell, a Lib-Lab railwaymen's leader, at this moment not unsympathetic to socialism. The I.L.P. was represented by Keir Hardie and Ramsay MacDonald, and the Fabians by E. R. Pease, secretary, and

George Bernard Shaw. The spokesmen of the S.D.F. were H. R. Taylor, an early member of the London County Council, and Harry Quelch, leading London trade unionist and editor of *Justice*.<sup>1</sup>

At last, on February 27th, 1900, almost unnoticed amid the jingo excitement of the South African War, the foundation conference of the L.R.C. met in the Memorial Hall, Faringdon Street, London. It consisted of delegates of forty-one unions with a total affiliated membership of 353,070, seven trades councils (mainly in the Midlands and North of England), and the socialist societies, claiming a total membership of 22,861.

Steadman, in opening the conference, stated clearly the main common factor of agreement which was present among all the complicated cross-currents of opinion. He had once believed in simple trade unionism, he said, until a dispute in his own trade ten years earlier had convinced him that the leaders of the advanced movement who believed in political action were right and he was wrong. He now gave way to no man in his desire to see labour better represented in the House of Commons.

Now, however, that a substantial proportion of the organised labour movement was turning to political action, a number of difficult problems had to be tackled. What sort of people were to be supported as candidates for Parliament? What was to be the general policy of the new organisation, its short and long term aims? Who was to be represented in it, and on what basis? What control was it to have over candidates and M.P.s? Some kind of working arrangement had to be reached on these and similar questions if progress was to be made at all; so it was upon them that the most important discussions centred at the early conferences of the L.R.C.

The first conference quickly made a definite decision on the question whether support should be confined to candidates who were themselves members of the working class. When a resolution was put forward that only such candidates should be supported, an amendment was moved by G. N. Barnes, the Engineers' leader and a member of the I.L.P. and seconded by John Burns, now M.P. for Battersea, urging support for "men

<sup>1</sup> Shortly after the conference, Quelch put the offices of *Justice* at the disposal of Lenin for the preparation of the paper *Iskra*—"The Spark"—which was smuggled into Russia past the Tsarist police.

sympathetic with the aims and demands of the labour movement and whose candidatures are promoted by one or other of the organised movements represented at this conference." Burns, who was to get a seat in the next Liberal Cabinet, told the conference:

"I am getting tired of working-class boots, working-class trains, working-class houses and working-class margarine. I believe that the time has arrived in the history of the Labour and social movement when we should not be prisoners to class prejudice but should consider parties and policies apart from all class organisations."

The resolution was also opposed by the socialist organisations, not only because they, especially the Fabians, had themselves members who were not workers, but because they had only a few years earlier seen a similar test—"working at his trade"—used to exclude socialists such as Keir Hardie from the T.U.C. Further, this sectarian trade union standpoint was naturally not strongly represented among the unions supporting the idea of Labour representation, whatever support there might be for it elsewhere. The Barnes amendment, widened to include the Co-operative Movement whose support was much desired, was adopted by 102 votes to three.

The question of policy was raised by James Macdonald of the S.D.F., who proposed the formation of a party "based upon recognition of the class war, and having as its ultimate object the socialisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange". This party should "formulate its own policy for promoting practical legislative measures in the interests of Labour and should be prepared to co-operate with any party that would support such measures or assist in opposing measures of an opposite character." This proposal, which was not supported even by all the socialists, was rejected, an amendment being adopted which proposed a short simple list of demands outside which each candidate should be free to follow his individual inclinations.

Keir Hardie felt that this did not go far enough, and he proposed another amendment, which was adopted by fifty-three votes to thirty-nine with thirty-seven abstentions. This favoured

"establishing a distinct Labour group in Parliament who shall

have their own whips and agree upon their policy, which must embrace a readiness to co-operate with any party which, for the time being, may be engaged in promoting legislation in the direct interest of Labour and be equally ready to associate themselves with any party in opposing measures which have an opposite tendency, and further, members of the Labour Group shall not oppose any candidate whose nomination is being promoted in terms of Resolution I."

The Labour Representation Committee was then elected, comprising seven trade unionists, two members of the I.L.P., two members of the S.D.F. and one of the Fabian Society, and Ramsay MacDonald became its secretary.

A historic step forward had been taken in the development of the labour movement. After years of tremendous growth in hard-fought industrial struggle, and after two decades of teaching by the socialist pioneers, the trade unions, or at least at this stage a substantial proportion of them, were at last turning to political organisation and action; and they were doing this in alliance with the socialist societies, including, at the start, the Marxists.

The weaknesses of the new organisation, however, were grave. They stemmed principally from the heritage of liberalism—or acceptance of the ideas and leadership of a section of the ruling class—which as we have seen was strong in the leadership of most of the unions and had been elaborated by the Fabians in new and subtler forms and spread to the broader movement by the I.L.P. of which the Fabians were the political mentors. The prime exponent of Liberal-Fabian reformism in the labour movement, now taking its first steps towards organisational independence in politics, was the L.R.C.'s first secretary, Ramsay MacDonald. He was the prototype of a new kind of Labour career politician. In the past, such people had been able to "rise in the world" only by becoming the faithful servants of the Liberals—as is to be seen in the supreme example of John Burns—but now the expanding field of Labour politics offered new opportunities. And MacDonald, with his handsome presence, his melodious voice and high-sounding oratory, was pre-eminently the man to take advantage of them.

He saw clearly, as indeed the Fabians had seen for some years, the challenge implicit in the emergence of the Labour Party. Was the Party going to take further steps towards a

conscious class policy, towards becoming a Socialist Party, "independent" not only in organisation but in ideas, aims and action? Or was it to try to lead the working class back into support of Liberal-capitalist policies? In other words, was this broad workers' party to be inspired and guided by Marxism, or was it to stumble forward, befogged and misled by ruling-class ideas? MacDonald succeeded in making the latter ideas appear still acceptable to the workers by covering them with socialist phrases. He set out to present an alternative to Marxism: the result still serves as a "theory" for right-wing Labour, though his name in the movement became a by-word for betrayal when he openly went over to the capitalists in 1931.

MacDonald's basic idea was the rejection of the theory of class struggle. Taking a specious biological analogy, he likened society to an organism such as the human body. The Labour Party, he argued in a book published in 1908 (*Socialism and Society*), was formed because trade unionism had found from experience that class war led nowhere. Socialism marked the growth of society, not the uprising of a class; its basis was the idea of national and communal growth, a state of business efficiency, with nothing "sectional" about it. Here indeed was liberalism dressed in socialistic phrases.

It was to the question of policy that the L.R.C. turned again at its second conference, in 1901. A resolution by Quelch which would, like that of James Macdonald the previous year, have committed the Party to a socialist aim, was opposed by all the I.L.P. and trade union delegates and rejected. The conference adopted instead a resolution from James Sexton, an I.L.P. member who represented the Liverpool dockers. It declared that:

"In view of the combinations of capital and the federations of employers, it is necessary for the trade unions of the country to use their political power to defend their interests and to secure their demands, and while it deprecates the introduction of mere party politics into the trade union movement, it urges upon trade unionists the necessity of combining on an independent platform for the following purposes: (1) the defence of the legal rights of combination. (2) The passing of such laws as will put an end to the system under which the producer of wealth has to bear an enormous burden in the shape of rents and profits which go to maintain a large class of non-producers."

It was as a consequence of the rejection of the resolution for socialism that the real tragedy of these years occurred: by a major sectarian mistake, the S.D.F. cut itself off from the new movement. The Social Democrats thus deprived themselves at once of the opportunity to counter the weaknesses and unhealthy tendencies in the L.R.C. and to develop within themselves a capacity for mass leadership. They were not able, as Lenin noted in 1907, "to envisage the theoretically helpless, but vital, mass, powerful labour movement which is marching side by side with them". (Quoted, *Lenin on Britain*, p. 75.) The mistake had unhappy consequences not only for the L.R.C., but also for the S.D.F. itself, which was weakened by internal dissension. Among the rank and file of the Federation, there was growing discontent with the Hyndman leadership, and in 1903, part of the membership which centred mainly on the Clyde broke away to form the Socialist Labour Party. Violently opposed to all political compromise, or indeed to any association with other socialist groups, the S.L.P. later turned to advocacy of industrial action. The tradition of militancy thus established, however, found reflection in the Clydeside struggles of the first World War, in which S.L.P. trade unionists played an active part. In 1920, the best militants of the S.L.P. helped to form the Communist Party.<sup>1</sup>

The prospects of the L.R.C. did not at the outset seem very bright. With little time for preparation, it was plunged into the "Khaki Election" of 1900, held amid a welter of jingoism which penetrated right into the heart of the labour movement itself. The new party was running against the tide, and only two of its fifteen candidates—Keir Hardie at Merthyr and Richard Bell at Derby—were successful. Bell was soon to go back to the Liberals, thus leaving Hardie as the only Labour M.P., though there were two Lib-Labs and five miners' M.P.s. who stood aloof from him.

Next year, however, the situation was transformed by the powerful mass movement which arose as a reaction to the Taff Vale judgment. By this move, the ultimate sanction of the

<sup>1</sup> In 1905, another split took place in the S.D.F., when part of the membership, this time mainly centred in London, formed the Socialist Party of Great Britain, a body so sectarian that it adjured both politics and trade union action, believing that socialism would come when everyone was converted. Fifty years later it was still a tiny sect, mainly concerned with echoing propaganda hostile to the Soviet Union.

unions had been wrested from their hands just when real wages were falling, as the result of a rise in prices which now began, after decades of decline. The trade union movement which so far had, at best, supported the L.R.C. rather half-heartedly, now really began to put its weight behind political action. By 1903, affiliated trade union membership had grown to nearly a million, and the number of trades councils affiliated from seven to seventy-six. And soon the rising tide began to show itself at the by-elections. In 1902, David Shackleton got in at Clitheroe, while in the following year Will Crooks succeeded at Woolwich and Arthur Henderson (a member of the Iron-founders and the L.R.C.'s first organiser) was elected at Barnard Castle.

But although the new party was growing, the principles of its organisation and policy were still only loosely defined. There was a strong tendency for unions to run their own candidates rather than to support candidates for the whole labour movement. Some of the trade union leaders wanted the exclusion of the socialists. A move to widen and strengthen the L.R.C.'s political authority was made at the 1902 annual conference by Pete Curran, an I.L.P. pioneer and delegate of the Gasworkers. He proposed that the committee should be instructed to consider methods of meeting the expenses of the parliamentary candidates and of maintaining those elected. Labour M.Ps. must represent all Labour interests and must be supported from joint funds. After reference to the unions, such a fund was established at the 1903 Conference, when it was also decided that candidates must give a pledge that they would stand by the majority decision of the Labour Group in Parliament, and that they would not associate with other parties. The resolution was by no means unopposed and it was on this occasion that Keir Hardie made his impassioned plea for what he called "labourism".

"They had fixed upon a common denominator, that, when acting in the House of Commons, they should be neither Socialists, Liberals, nor Tories, but a Labour Party. They were seeking by the resolution to prevent individuals from disrupting the movement. Let them beware lest they surrender themselves to Liberalism, which would shackle them, gag them, and leave them a helpless, discredited and impotent mass. Let them have done with Liberalism and Toryism and every other 'ism' that is



not Labourism, and let them give the rank and file a straight and honest lead, and if that were done, the rank and file would support them."<sup>1</sup>

Following the adoption of the new constitution, and complementary to it, was the severing of the formal connection between the L.R.C. and its parent body, the T.U.C. In 1904, Richard Bell, congress president and now an out-and-out Liberal, ruled that the L.R.C. was an "outside organisation", and therefore that congress had no control over it.

Meanwhile, the political and social situation in Britain, and indeed in the world at large, had been changing. Not only had the trade union movement put its mass strength behind the L.R.C. in the campaign to restore the fundamental rights of working-class organisation: the profound social problems which had been temporarily obscured by the boom at the end of the century and the imperialist excitements of the South African War remained unsolved. Poverty and unemployment, assuming giant proportions with the return of slump conditions after the war, stood out in glaring contrast to the unashamed profiteering and luxury of finance capital. But these were no longer evils to be passively endured: the revival of socialist thought and the powerful growth of working-class organisation which had been going on since the 'eighties now offered the way and the means to sweep them away. A resolution carried by a special conference on unemployment and school meals for children, held in January, 1905, with Keir Hardie in the chair, declared:

"Unemployment is not caused by scarcity of land, of capital, of national wealth, or by incapacity to consume, because in times of depression, such as we are now experiencing, the wealth producers are compelled to starve in the midst of plenty." Neither Protection nor Free Trade was the remedy, the real causes of the evil lay in "the existence of monopoly and the burdens which the non-producing sections impose on the industrious classes together with the lack of such organisation of industry as will prevent alternate periods of overwork and unemployment." (Quoted, W. S. Adams, *The Edwardian Heritage*, 1919, p. 218.)

It was in this spirit that the new generation of socialist local government representatives had been and were carrying on

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted, however, that at this very time "Ramsay MacDonald with Hardie's connivance, was arranging a secret electoral understanding with the Liberal whips", as the Herbert Gladstone papers show (*Pelling, op. cit.*, pp. 240-1).

agitation on behalf of the unemployed and against the niggardly meanness and bumbledom of the Poor Law which was to be so startlingly exposed in Beatrice Webb's Minority Report for the Royal Commission on the subject appointed in 1905. Outstanding among the ceaseless agitations of the period was the East End deputation introduced to the Prime Minister by Quelch, James Macdonald, Margaret Bondfield, George Lansbury and Will Crooks, M.P. in November, 1905. Arranged by the London Trades Council and other local organisations, the deputation was supported by a demonstration of thousands, bearing banners with such slogans as "Workers of the World Unite", "The Poplar Unemployed Demand the Right to Work", and "Work for Our Men—Bread for Our Children".

All over the world in these early years of the century imperialism was plunged into deep economic, social and political crisis, and for the working class, both in the capitalist and the colonial countries, a phase of militant advance was opening. The mightiest blow in this upsurge was delivered by the Russian workers in the Revolution of 1905, shaking the vast empire of the Tsars to its foundations and inspiring new hope and resolution in the common people everywhere. The international repercussions were tremendous: mighty demonstrations in the Austro-Hungarian Empire forced the Government in Vienna to concede manhood suffrage; the German workers were profoundly stirred; and in France in 1906 there were great strikes for the eight-hour day. In the colonial countries, the consequences were perhaps even more profound and far-reaching, for one of the great imperialist powers had been shown to have feet of clay: now began the great national revolutionary movements which were to transform the destinies of hundreds of millions of people of China and India.

The events in Russia in 1905, the popular revolt against one of the world's most hated despotisms, roused deep sympathy among all sections of democratic opinion in Britain, both working class and middle class. On January 24th a meeting of the Stepney unemployed, and the next day a dinner-hour meeting of the Elswick (Newcastle) shipyard workers, protested against the massacre of workers at St. Petersburg. On January 25th, an I.L.P. rally the day before the opening of the annual Labour Representation Conference began with a resolution of sympathy with the Russian people in their revolt

against tyranny. "As the import of the resolution gradually dawned on the audience", reported *The Labour Leader* of January 27th, "a great cheer went up and at the close everyone stood in assent and cheered it to the echo." The conference itself passed unanimously a similar resolution and gave instructions for the opening of a fund "to aid the strikers in their noble fight for freedom and relieve the needs of widows and orphans." *Justice*, in whose columns Theodore Rothstein was giving the most informed commentary on these mighty events, declared on the same date: "The hour has struck at last. After centuries of bondage and misery the people of Russia has risen, and the throne of the Tsar is shaking to its foundations." In many big centres, such as London, Liverpool and Glasgow, great rallies were held, often sponsored jointly by the S.D.F., I.L.P., Fabians and trade union organisations. Keir Hardie asked in Parliament for representations to be made to the Tsarist Government regarding the shooting without trial of 120 working-class leaders in Warsaw.

The Russian Revolution thus added a new and potent element to the profound stirring of ideas and growing activity of the working-class movement which was already actively campaigning on unemployment and the threat to the foundations of trade unionism, apart from other issues of social and economic policy. The capitalist counter-offensive, carried on through twenty years of unbroken Tory rule, was now running into real difficulties: apart from the "condition of England question", there were the formidable problems of Tariffs or Free Trade, growing international tension and Irish freedom, to name only the most outstanding. The split in the Conservative ranks over tariffs precipitated the resignation of the Government, and at the end of 1905, the dour Scottish Radical, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, who had roused hatred of Tories by denouncing atrocities in South Africa, formed a Government and went to the country early in the New Year.

The General Election of 1906 brought a sweeping victory for the Liberals and an advance for Labour which astounded contemporary opinion. The Labour Party (as the L.R.C. now came to be called) increased its representation from four seats to twenty-nine, and there were in addition twenty-four trade union candidates (of whom thirteen were miners) who won their seats as Liberals.

The working class had made a really significant political advance, but the complex social tendencies which had produced this result must be carefully analysed if its true significance is to be understood. In the first place, the policy of the Liberals was based upon a strategic retreat by the capitalists in the face of mounting working-class pressure. Balfour, the Conservative leader, shrewdly observed this when he commented on the election result:

"If I read the signs aright, what has occurred had nothing to do with any of the things we have been squabbling about over the last few years. C.-B. (Campbell-Bannerman) is a mere cork dancing on a torrent which he cannot control, and what is going on here is the echo of the same movement which has produced massacres in St. Petersburg, riots in Vienna and Socialist processions in Berlin."

The Liberals, however, believed that the storm could be ridden by an astute policy of real concessions, radical demagoguery and electoral arrangements with the Labour Party, and that thus power could be retained in the hands of a ruling-class party with the working-class party as a subordinate ally. This was the supreme object for which they fought and which they won. The master demagogue, David Lloyd George, declared at a meeting only a few months after the election that he could tell his Liberal audience what would "make this independent Labour Party movement a great and sweeping force".

"If at the end of an average term of office it were found that a Liberal Parliament had done nothing to cope seriously with the social condition of the people, to remove the national degradation of slums and widespread poverty and destitution in a land glittering with wealth, that they had shrunk to attack boldly the main causes of this wretchedness notably the drink and this vicious land system, that they had not arrested the waste of our national resources in armaments, nor provided an honourable sustenance for deserving old age, that they had tamely allowed the House of Lords to extract all the virtue out of their Bills, then would a real cry arise in this land for a new party, and many of us here in this room would join in that cry. But if a Liberal Government tackle the landlords, and the brewers, and the peers, as they have faced the parsons, and try to deliver the nation from the pernicious control of this confederacy of monopolists, then the independent Labour Party will call in vain upon the working

men of Britain to desert Liberalism that is gallantly fighting to rid the land of the wrongs that have oppressed those who labour in it." (Quoted M. Beer, *History of British Socialism*, 1929, Vol. II, pp. 348-9.)

Here was a policy on which, however loudly they might proclaim their "independence", most of the parliamentary representatives of the Labour Party were quite glad to co-operate, a policy which in effect amounted to trying to improve capitalism in order to maintain it, or more bluntly, to buying off the British working class from the super-profits of imperialist monopoly and colonial exploitation.

The great electoral victory of the Labour Party, therefore, had a dual character: it was part of a far-seeing policy by a section of the ruling class to divert and control the forces of working-class independence; on the other hand, those forces were real, growing and in triumphant mood and the concessions which they extracted were also real. They were able to compel the reluctant Liberal leadership to honour its promise by accepting a bill to free the trade unions from the threat of civil claims of the Taff Vale type. Other important gains followed: workmen's compensation was extended to a further six million workers; local authorities were given permission to institute school meals; under the Coal Mines Act of 1908 the miners gained the eight-hour day; in the same year non-contributory old age pensions were introduced; in 1909 the Trade Boards Act made a small beginning in tackling the evil of sweated labour.

Significant too was the fact that in this time of political elation, when it seemed that the bastions of privilege were falling before the advance of the people, the emergence of the Labour Party loomed quite as large as the Liberal landslide, and the feature of the Labour Party which attracted most attention was that it appeared to be a socialist party.

## CHAPTER VIII

### SOCIALISM AND THE GREAT UNREST

#### 1. *The Fight for a Socialist Policy*

NOW came a marked growth of socialist teaching, organisation and activity. In 1906, the I.L.P. reported 130 new branches, while the S.D.F. claimed eighty-six new branches in the years 1905-6, and also the affiliation of the important Socialist Societies of Bristol and Newcastle. Some S.D.F. branches were holding as many as eight meetings a week. Federations and county groups were springing up, sometimes for the S.D.F. or I.L.P. alone, sometimes for all socialist organisations. The Clarion Fellowships and Clarion Scouts were stronger and more active than ever, and hundreds of meetings were held with the aid of the two Clarion vans, one in Scotland and one in London. S.D.F. pamphlets poured from the Twentieth Century Press, and the circulations of the three Socialist papers, *Justice*, *The Labour Leader* and *The Clarion* mounted as the year wore on. Big gains were made both by the I.L.P. and the S.D.F. in the municipal elections of 1906. (See Fred Knee, *Socialism in 1906* in the S.D.F. *Socialist Annual*, 1907. Knee, a leading member of the S.D.F. and a sub-editor on *Justice*, was later secretary of the London Trades Council. While serving in that post, he played a vital part in the formation in 1914 of the London Labour Party, of which he was the first secretary.)

Socialist ideas were now having an appreciable effect in the field of adult education: in addition to the S.D.F., the Socialist Labour Party had begun studies in economics, with classes on the works of Marx, Engels and Lafargue. The Social Science Library of popular sociology included some Marxist works. As early as 1903, the ferment of ideas among the workers and their demand for education opportunities was so great that the Workers' Educational Association, linking the organised working-class movement and the universities, was founded, to cater for the demand while at the same time countering the influence of Marxism. The two trends in working-class education

were sharply visible in the case of Ruskin College, Oxford, founded in 1899 to give a year's course to thirty or forty workers. The students wanted to be taught Marxist economics, and in this had the sympathy of the Principal, Dennis Hird. By 1906, the conflict between the students and the authorities had become serious: later Hird was dismissed, and the dissatisfied students in 1909 formed the Plebs League for the popularisation of Marxism through workshop study circles.

"Not for many years has Socialism loomed so large in the public eye as in 1906", wrote Knee. "Never before has so much Socialist activity been displayed or have the conscious Socialist forces so increased in numerical strength. For work done, for progress made, for fear inspired by Socialism in the governing classes, 1906 stands an easy record."

Despite the spate of anti-socialist propaganda which such developments provoked, socialism now showed signs of becoming a real political force. In a by-election at Jarrow in 1907, Pete Curran, the I.L.P. and new unionist pioneer who was attacked with particular virulence because of his socialist views, won the seat, topping the poll over his three opponents. Even more striking was the success of Victor Grayson at the Colne Valley by-election, in which he stood as an unqualified socialist, unsupported by the Labour Party, beating a Liberal and a Tariff Reformer. In their baffled rage, the Tories now began to brand orthodox Labour and even Liberal candidates as socialists and revolutionaries: at Kirkdale they made the issues socialism, atheism and free love in their campaign against a Labour candidate.

But the socialist organisations "responded gloriously to the challenge", and in consequence grew in membership and activity. The Social-Democratic Party, as the S.D.F. was known from April, 1908, reported a rapid increase in the number of its branches and an improvement in membership and organisation particularly in London and Scotland. The I.L.P. now boasted of 700 branches and could maintain a number of organisers. (Knee, *Socialism in 1907*, in the *Socialist Annual*, 1908.) As Lenin noted in the following year, only the blind could fail to see that socialism was growing rapidly among the working class and was once more becoming a mass movement. (Quoted *Lenin on Britain*, p. 96.)

Thus the central issue now before the political labour movement was that of socialism, of real independence of policy and not merely of formal organisational separation from the ruling-class parties, combined with a policy of greater insistence on social reforms within the framework of capitalism. Disregarding all the complicated cross-currents within the movement as a whole, two marked trends were to be observed: on the one hand, the rank and file of the organised workers suffering once more from the return of mass unemployment and from a fall in real wages following the rise in prices which began about the opening of the century, were pressing forward for bigger concessions, for more drastic reforms and were turning to the socialist view of the necessity for a fundamental change in society. On the other hand, the bulk of the trade union officials, still Liberal in outlook, and the Fabian-reformist leaders of the I.L.P. and the Labour Party were forming increasingly strong ties with ruling-class circles and the Liberal Party in particular. The Parliamentary Labour Party, whose members had discarded Keir Hardie's cloth cap for the silk hat, were subject to many-sided corrupting influences both at Westminster and at the country houses of ruling-class politicians. From their attitude and outlook, it seemed that the Liberals might well realise their ardent hope that Labour's role might be confined to that of being an appendage of the Liberal Party serving to keep the workers quiet. Ramsay MacDonald, arch-careerist and phrase-maker, now became parliamentary leader in succession to Keir Hardie, who was torn between his militant working-class past and the increasing opportunism of the party he had done so much to build.

"My strongest reason for desiring to get out of the chair", he wrote to Philip Snowden in 1907, "is that I may be free to speak out occasionally. In the last session, the party has practically dropped out of public notice . . . the tendency evidently is to work in close and cordial harmony with the Government and if this policy be persisted in we shall lose our identity and be wiped out along with the Liberals and we shall richly deserve our fate. By another session, those of us who are Socialists and believe in fighting will have to get together occasionally on our own account and if we cannot drag the party with us, we will 'gang oor ain gait'."

While the gulf was widening between the parliamentary



leadership of the Labour Party on the one hand and the political and trade union militants on the other, strong trends were growing in favour of a united socialist policy. Grayson himself, though his exposition of socialism was more colourful than profound, for a time personified this unrest. He fought Colne Valley without the official endorsement of his party, the I.L.P. Afterwards, the I.L.P. agreed to accept him, but he refused to sign the Labour Party constitution, and therefore sat as an independent socialist, though still retaining his membership of the I.L.P. Next year, when the Labour Party introduced a Right to Work Bill, Grayson denounced the Labour Party for the feebleness of its efforts on behalf of the unemployed, and after scenes in the House of Commons, was suspended for the remainder of the session, which time he spent in a fiery campaign in the country. The executive of the S.D.P. had at once declared its support for Grayson, and there now developed an increasing association between Grayson, Hyndman and Blatchford in their propaganda work. Grayson won wide support among the rank and file of the I.L.P., as was shown in 1909, when the party's annual conference referred back paragraphs relating to him in the National Administrative Council's report. As an expression of their disapproval of this support for Grayson and indeed of the mood of revolt against the perpetual compromises of the Parliamentary Labour Party, the "Big Four" of the I.L.P.—Hardie, MacDonald, Snowden and Glaisier—temporarily resigned from the National Administrative Committee.

In the Social-Democratic Party, opinion in favour of unity was growing too. The election victory of 1906 strengthened the minority opinion that it had been a mistake to leave the Labour Party. The 1906 conference of the S.D.F. had passed almost unanimously a resolution in favour of socialist unity, and rejected by only fifty-two votes to thirty-six a resolution proposing that branches should not be allowed to join local Labour Representation Committees. The I.L.P. leadership, however, would have nothing to do with any idea of fusion with the S.D.F. After the Colne Valley by-election, the S.D.F. with its allies among the *Clarion* supporters were constantly under attack, notably by MacDonald, who described them as "stupid tub-thumpers", but also by Keir Hardie.

The growth of socialist opinion was shown at the 1908

Labour Party Conference, though that growth was not yet sufficient to have a decisive influence on policy. On the discussion of amendments to the constitution, William Atkinson, delegate of the Paper Stainers and a member of the S.D.F. (whose members still attended Labour Party Conferences as trade union delegates) moved that it was the Party's aim to maintain a parliamentary party "whose ultimate object shall be the obtaining for the workers the full results of their labour by the overthrow of the present competitive system of capitalism and the institution of a system of public ownership and control of all the means of life."

Opponents of the resolution said that they must not impose a socialist programme on the trade unions. J. R. Clynes, M.P. (Oldham Trades Council), while declaring that he himself accepted public ownership, declared: "They were not out as a matter of fact, for ultimate objects; they were out for Old Age Pensions; they were out for immediate industrial legislation; they were out for some kind of effective and helpful legislation on the subject of unemployment; and at the same time, they were out in the country preaching ideals to the people."

The amendment was defeated by 931,000 votes to 91,000, but two days later the conference passed by 514,000 votes to 469,000 a socialist resolution proposed as "an expression of opinion", not binding as a statement of policy. Moved by J. J. Stephenson (Engineers), it said that the time had arrived when

"the Labour Party should have as a definite object the socialisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange, to be controlled by a democratic state in the interests of the entire community; and the complete emancipation of Labour from the domination of capitalism and landlordism, with the establishment of social and economic equality between the sexes."

This decision gave a new stimulus to the minority in the S.D.F. which favoured affiliation, and at the Federation's annual conference in the same year, the Burnley branch, whose leading member was Dan Irving, put forward a proposal for a reconsideration of the Federation's attitude, "provided it is made clear that all S.D.F. candidates run as Socialists". Though it was supported by Hyndman, the resolution was defeated by 103 votes to thirty-one. Quelch was the principal

opponent of re-affiliation. This important minority opinion, which argued that the Federation had lost a big chance of leading the workers away from Liberalism, still continued in the organisation; but it was overborne for the time being by the feeling that the Labour Party must show real independence of the capitalist parties before socialists could commit themselves to it.

The short-sightedness and harmfulness of such a view was revealed by the searching debate on this very subject at the International Socialist Bureau in 1908. The I.L.P. which, with the S.D.P., formed the British Section, asked for the affiliation of the Labour Party to the International, for which socialist parties recognising the class struggle and labour organisations such as trade unions accepting the point of view of the class struggle, were eligible. Karl Kautsky, the German Social-Democrat, moved acceptance on the grounds that the Labour Party, "although it does not directly recognise the proletarian class struggle, it nevertheless wages the struggle and in fact and by its very organisation, which is independent of bourgeois parties, is adopting the basis of the class struggle". Hyndman and others demanded the maintenance of the *status quo* until the Labour Party directly recognised the principles of the class struggle and socialism.

Lenin spoke in support of acceptance of the Labour Party, which he described as the "Parliamentary representative of the trade unions", but proposed an amendment deleting the above quotation and substituting a passage stating as the reason for acceptance the fact that the Labour Party represented "the first step on the part of the really proletarian organisations of England towards a class-conscious policy and towards a *Socialist Labour Party*". He did so because Kautsky's resolution, which was carried unamended, made it appear "as if the International had certified that the Labour Party is *actually waging* a consistent class struggle, as if it was sufficient for the organised workers to form a separate Labour group in Parliament in order to become independent of the bourgeoisie *in the whole of their conduct*." Lenin held that his formulation "would compel hundreds of thousands of English workers, who undoubtedly respect the decisions of the International, but who have not yet quite become socialists, once again to think over the question as to why they are regarded as having taken only the *first* step,

and to think over what should be the *next* step along this road." (See *Lenin on Britain*, pp. 93-8.)

Soon the Parliamentary Labour Party, having repeatedly renounced a socialist platform, was driven into even greater dependence upon the Liberals by a severe blow at the hands of the Law Lords. A "Tory working man", W. V. Osborne, of the Walthamstow branch of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants, was able in 1909, with financial support from capitalist quarters, to secure a judgment from the House of Lords entitling him to restrain his union from levying its members or using its funds to support the Labour Party or maintain Members of Parliament. The principle of this judgment meant that the trade unions, whose financial support was vital to the Labour Party, were shorn of their right, unchallenged since 1876, to take or support political action.

The employers at once drove this advantage home, scouring the country for docile trade unionists prepared to take similar action against their unions. The Parliamentary Labour Party now faced the prospect of no salaries and no election expenses and therefore feared even more acutely than before to do anything which might endanger or embarrass the Liberal Government. The Liberals, no longer under the mass pressure which they had felt over the Taff Vale decision, were in no hurry to alter a situation so advantageous to themselves. Instead, two years later, they introduced payment of members (£400 a year), in itself a progressive measure, but in this context confirming the dependence of the Labour M.Ps. on the existence of the Liberal Government.

Not until 1913 was the situation partially restored by the Trade Union Act of that year, permitting unions to establish political funds by special resolution, with objectors having the right to "contract out".

Meanwhile, the Tories, anxious to recover power in order to implement their tariff policy, had begun to use the House of Lords, which they dominated, to reject Liberal Bills with a view to forcing a General Election. Lloyd George set out to turn the tables with the land tax budget of 1909 and a series of scarring denunciations of the landowners in speeches at Limehouse and elsewhere. The Lords, contrary to constitutional practice, rejected his budget, thus presenting one of the greatest demagogues of all time with the superb slogan of "Peers versus

the People", which enabled him to rally radical and working-class support in a heated and engrossing battle not related to the real issue affecting the people, the advance of an independent, socialist working-class movement.

Two general elections were fought in 1910 over this constitutional question before the Parliament Act of 1911, limiting the obstructive power of the House of Lords, was passed. From these campaigns, the Labour Party, which fought mainly in alliance with the Liberals, emerged with forty-two seats, but the increase from thirty was mainly due to the transfer to the Party of the miners' M.Ps. who had formerly sat as Lib-Labs—a change which, while consolidating the Labour forces in Parliament, greatly strengthened the Liberal element within them.<sup>1</sup>

The Conservatives and Liberals were now evenly represented, leaving the Labour and Irish M.Ps. to hold the balance. Henceforth, the Labour leadership excused themselves from adopting a vigorous, independent policy on the grounds that they dared not do anything to upset the Liberals lest the Tories should be returned. The Liberals, on the other hand, saw no reason for major concessions in social legislation.

Characteristic of the period was the National Insurance Act of 1911, dealing with health and unemployment: the scheme was financed by contributions from government, employers and workers, but as the employers' contribution tended to come out of wages, it was in the main a disguised form of the poor helping the poor. The administration of the scheme was handed over to approved societies—friendly societies, insurance companies and trade unions. The socialists and militant trade unionists were, of course, bitterly critical of the scheme, but the trade union leaders, flattered by another gesture of recognition from the state and seeing in it opportunities for an easy expansion of membership, welcomed it—and so in consequence did the Parliamentary Labour Party.

After two other measures of social reform in 1911—stipulating stricter safety measures in the mines and giving shop workers regular meal times and a weekly half-holiday—social reform legislation ceased.

<sup>1</sup> In the December, 1910 election the Labour vote fell. This was the first of only three occasions on which this happened in the next forty-five years. Each time the cause was Labour's identification with the capitalists.

The behaviour of the parliamentary leadership roused indignation and contempt among the socialists. MacDonald's smooth assurance at the I.L.P. conference of 1911 that "the great function of the House of Commons is to translate into legislation the Socialism that is preached in the country" came under withering attack. The corpse of Liberal-Labourism had been buried with the formation of the I.L.P., it was pointed out, but the spirit seemed to have revived in the modern Labour Party.<sup>1</sup> George Lansbury, now an I.L.P. Member of Parliament, said that more than once he had been ashamed of the conduct of his fellow Labour M.Ps. and thought of resigning.

"All the time the Liberals tried to engage the House with minor questions and the Labour members were not able to win independence for themselves. I do not know a single case when the Liberals and the Tories have not put forward some 'important' question in order to side-track the question of the poverty of the masses. I am in the House of Commons with the picture before me of those men and women who night after night toiled in the slums of Bow and Bromley to send me there. They worked for me because they thought that I was different from the Liberals and the Tories. They sent me to Parliament in order to face the question of poverty, poverty, poverty. . . . I call upon you to form a strong party in the House of Commons that will absolutely refuse to yield to the Liberals and Tories."

His speech was interrupted by thunders of applause . . . but MacDonald retained the leadership. Similar demands for real independence at the I.L.P. conference the following year, by F. W. Jowett and again by Lansbury, produced only verbal concessions from the leadership: Philip Snowden, for instance, while expressing the sympathy of his "fighting instinct" for Jowett's resolution, explained that "common sense, judgment and experience" led him to vote against it.

## 2. *Syndicalism and Socialist Revival*

The mood of the delegates to the I.L.P. conference was but one symptom of the angry revolt which was now growing among the workers, who, with their hopes of improved conditions dashed by the endless compromises of the Labour parliamentary leadership, now embarked upon a period of gigantic

<sup>1</sup> Will Thorne—one of the Labour M.Ps. who was then a member of the British Socialist Party—pointed out at the Labour Party Conference in 1913 that, of forty Labour M.Ps., only thirteen were Socialists.

struggle for an improved standard of life by industrial action. For four years before the outbreak of war in 1914, they hurled themselves into a mighty movement of strikes such as had not been seen since 1888-91. The dockers brought the ports to a standstill; the railwaymen paralysed the vast network of inland transport; a million miners left the pits as one man; engineering works, cotton mills and building sites were swept by this hurricane of revolt.

The glaring contrast between the mounting profits of finance capitalism and the people's falling standard of life—owing to stable wages and the rising cost of living—was one of the predisposing causes of the activity of this period, rightly known as “the Great Unrest”. But the real sources of the outstanding energy, discipline and self-sacrifice which the workers showed were wider and deeper. They were waging war upon the miseries of life: on poverty, exploitation, speed-up, overtime, arrogant employers, bad housing, the despair of a world in which a man was “too old at forty”. And side by side, partly intermingled, with this movement—particularly in the working-class areas—was the struggle for women's suffrage, not merely for the vote but to end the age-old idea of the inferiority of women.

The workers were feeling the strength which came from the growing unity and maturity of their class, and their eyes were turning beyond the immediate questions of wages and hours to the greater question of their part in the control of industry itself. As Lenin noted at the time, “if the railway strike of 1911 displayed the ‘new spirit’ of the British workers, the miners’ strike positively represents a new epoch”. (*Lenin on Britain*, p. 106.)

This rank-and-file revolt against the class collaboration of the leaders of the unions and working-class parties was common to all capitalist countries in these years. Militant workers with socialist ideas often turned away from the conception of a political party altogether and began to imagine that trade union action alone, with sufficient scope and vigour, would be sufficient to emancipate the workers. “Politics” for many of these militants, particularly in France and the United States, came to be a term of abuse.

The syndicalist movement which sought to organise this rank-and-file revolt had as its ultimate object the establishment

of a social order based upon the trade unions in which each union would take charge of its respective industry. The immediate object of syndicalism was to simplify the structure of the unions (along the lines of industrial unionism) and build their strength with a view to militant action. Syndicalism was the theory of the Industrial Workers of the World, in these years bitterly struggling with the brutal, arrogant employers of the United States. In France, in 1906, the General Confederation of Labour adopted a declaration in favour of the expropriatory general strike to be followed by a society with the trade union as "the basis of social organisation, as the group for production and distribution".

In Britain, the period which was opening in 1910 left a priceless heritage of unity, militancy and extended power. The gravest of its limitations lay in the same feature which caused this tremendous onslaught by the working class to take the almost purely industrial form it did—namely, the absence of a party capable of leading an all-sided struggle in the whole field of politics, trade unionism and ideas affecting every aspect of the life of the people.

The leaders of the I.L.P. and the Labour Party were far from such a conception and were being increasingly weakened by their all-absorbing concern with parliamentary opportunism. The S.D.P., though it included in its ranks some of the most devoted and militant workers and many active trade unionists, was still greatly embarrassed as a party by its traditional sectarianism.

That sectarianism was dying very hard. In 1907, at the great International Socialist Congress at Stuttgart, the S.D.F. had voted (as Lenin specially noted in an article against the Mensheviks in September that year) for a resolution demanding close co-operation between Social Democrats and the trade unions. In British conditions, this meant, among other things, co-operation between them in the Labour Party. But, as we have seen, the S.D.F. conference in 1908 defeated the proposal for affiliation to the Labour Party; and at the International Socialist Bureau, the S.D.P. delegates in the same year opposed acceptance of the Labour Party into the I.S.B.

The S.D.P. was right in opposing the opportunism of the I.L.P.; Lenin in April, 1908, bracketed its struggle with that of the Orthodox Marxists against the Revisionists in Germany



and of the Bolsheviks against the Mensheviks in Russia (Lenin, *Marxism and Revisionism*, Selected Works, English edition 1950, Vol. 1, Part I, p. 95). But it was wrong in failing to discriminate in practice between the confused rank-and-file and the opportunist leaders within the trade unions—particularly now that the unions, as Lenin pointed out in another article six months later, were “approaching Socialism, awkwardly, hesitatingly, in zig-zag fashion but, approaching it nevertheless”. (*Lenin on Britain*, p. 96.) For such an attitude meant pushing the mass of trade unionists, now in rebellious mood, back into the arms of their opportunist leaders. This gave an extra impetus to the development of syndicalism—which in Britain was an attempt to solve the problem of doing away with capitalism without the leadership of a socialist party.

It would be wrong to suppose, however, that the errors of the period 1908-14 were the same as those of twenty years earlier, and that the S.D.P. was in everyday practice merely waiting until its propaganda for socialism had converted the working class. An illustration of the degree of advance was the Conference on Food Supply which it convened on July 25th, 1909, when problems of idle acreage, the formation of a national wheat reserve, public transport and marketing organisation, nationalisation of agricultural land and agricultural wages boards were discussed in an extremely practical and matter-of-fact spirit. Among the organisations represented were the Parliamentary Committee of the Scottish T.U.C. and eleven trade unions, including the Dockers, Gasworkers, Shop Assistants, Furnishing Trades and Natsopa, sixteen trade union district committees and branches, including the London Engineers and the London Postmen; ten Trades Councils, including London, Glasgow, Aberdeen, Coventry and Southampton; six co-operative societies, including the Royal Arsenal (Woolwich), Edmonton, Bolton and Blaine; eight I.L.P. branches and five Labour Representation Committees, as well as forty-one S.D.P. branches. Letters of good-will were read from eleven trades councils (including Liverpool, Bradford, Stockport and Falkirk) and five co-operative societies (including Wolverhampton, Oldham and Liverpool). An organisation able to convene such a conference was no longer as isolated from the broad mass of organised Labour as in the 'eighties. Another illustration of the vigorous, down-to-earth

attitude which could show itself, was an article in the S.D.P. monthly, *The Social-Democrat*, in 1910, by Fred Knee, in which this prominent member of the party (and of the London Society of Compositors) denounced the capitalist press campaign against unofficial strikes. He also took to task the trade union officials who attacked workers for kicking against encroachments by the employers on their conditions, instead of waiting for "collective bargaining" to operate. "Instead of lecturing the men for insubordination to leaders, if anybody is to be lectured it should be the leaders when they mutiny against the men." (Reprinted in *Labour Monthly*, June, 1950.)

Nevertheless, for reasons already indicated, the temporary rise of syndicalism was inevitable. The theory gained influence too among various groups of workers, including the militant students of Ruskin College who formed the Central Labour College in 1909. Supported by the South Wales Miners' Federation and later by the National Union of Railwaymen which was formed in 1913, the Central Labour College based its teaching upon "the recognition of the antagonism of interests between Capital and Labour", and aimed to "equip workers to propagate and defend the interests of their class". (Sources quoted by M. Beer, *History of British Socialism*, Vol. II, p. 353.)

The Plebs League, formed of students and former students of the College, established schools in Scotland, South Wales and the Midlands. Among its teachers was John Maclean of the B.S.P., soon to be a leader of the wartime movement on Clydeside.

And perhaps the greatest of this generation of outstanding militants was Tom Mann, who reappeared on the British scene in 1910, experienced in struggles for working-class emancipation all round the world. Returning from his travels, which had included Australia, where he had seen the weakness of a Labour Government, and Paris, where he had studied French syndicalism, Mann at once plunged into the struggle for new policy and organisation in the British unions. Groups of militants carried the message into their respective industries, and with the assistance of Guy Bowman, a journalist, Mann edited a series of monthly booklets. From time to time, periodicals such as *The Syndicalist Railwayman* and *The Transport Worker* were published. From the unofficial Reform Movement in

South Wales came that famous document of revolutionary trade unionism, *The Miners' Next Step*, (1912) which A. J. Cook helped to prepare. In the autumn of 1910, 200 syndicalist delegates met in Manchester and formed the Industrial Syndicalist Education League. Under its auspices *The Industrial Syndicalist* appeared monthly until the following year. In January, 1912, appeared the first number of *The Syndicalist*, edited by Bowman.

Constant emphasis was placed by the new movement upon the need to strengthen and simplify the existing union structure.

The "fatal weakness" of contemporary British trade unionism, said the first issue of *The Industrial Syndicalist*, was to be found "simply if not solely in the sectional character of the 1,100 unions of the United Kingdom—in the complete absence of the true spirit of working-class solidarity, and therefore in the inability of the unionists to utilise the machinery at their disposal for scientifically conducting the class war."

An example was to be seen in the shipbuilding industry, where twenty-four unions had "never been able to take combined action against the capitalists". Mann and his friends were confident that

"however reactionary the unions might be at this hour, the only sensible idea would be to recognise them as the proper channels through which, sooner or later, the working class would have to function. So we declined to be identified with any policy that aimed at injuring the unions, but worked might and main within their ranks to throw them on to the right lines." (Mann, *From Single Tax to Socialism*, p. 64.)

It is easy to see how, in this picture, the idea of a revolutionary working-class party, co-ordinating and guiding the struggle of the workers in a variety of fields, could disappear altogether. And in fact, most syndicalist writings showed this.

Strong and efficient unions were an essential preliminary to the second stage of the syndicalist programme—the control of industry itself.

"Vitality essential it is to show", Mann wrote in *The Industrial Syndicalist* (April, 1911), "that economic emancipation to the working class can only be secured by the working class asserting

its power in workshops, factories, warehouses, mills and mines, on ships and boats and engines, and wherever work is performed, ever extending their control over the tools of production until, by the power of the internationally organised proletariat, capitalist production shall entirely cease and the industrial socialist republic shall be ushered in, and thus the Socialist Revolution realised."

The South Wales coalfield, the scene at this time of a great strike in the Cambrian Combine, was the homeland of *The Miners' Next Step*. The following extracts from its policy statement illustrate the nature of its approach.

"1. That the old policy of identity of interest between employers and ourselves be abolished, and a policy of open hostility installed.

"13. That a continual agitation be carried on in favour of increasing the minimum wage and shortening the hours of work until we have extracted the whole of the employers' profits.

"14. That our objective be to build up an organisation that will ultimately take over the mining industry and carry it on in the interests of the workers."

But the pamphlet insisted that any leader *as such* "has an interest—a vested interest—in stopping progress" (p. 8); that "all leaders become corrupt, in spite of their own good intentions" (p. 13); that "an industrial vote will affect the lives and happiness of workmen far more than a political vote" (p. 24); that the miners' union should not only engage in political action itself, but combine with all other unions "to work for the taking over of all industries by the workmen themselves" (p. 19). These passages, and much else in the pamphlet, show how the bitter experience of Labour Party opportunism and the unpractical attitude of the Social Democrats were creating an indifference, even a hostility, to any form of political organisation of the workers.

The mood of growing militancy in the working class had important repercussions in the various socialist organisations, as we have already noted in the case of the I.L.P. and Clarion groups.

Even the Fabian Society went through a series of crises: within it there rose against the old leadership of the Webbs and Shaw one group of rebels after another, beginning with H. G. Wells, the novelist, and ending with G. D. H. Cole and the

supporters of "Guild Socialism".<sup>1</sup> Two developments of lasting importance emerged from the crisis in the Fabian Society: first, the establishment of the Fabian Research Department, which became the Labour Research Department, with a tradition of militancy and close co-operation with the trade unions in their struggles which it has maintained ever since; and secondly the socialist movement among the university students which was begun just before 1914 by university Fabian Societies (the poet Rupert Brooke was one of the pioneers in this field).

The most important political development in the labour movement, however, was the attempt of the S.D.P. to draw together the various socialist trends into a United Socialist Party. On the initiative of the S.D.P., a conference was held in Manchester in 1911 which was attended by forty-one delegates of I.L.P. branches, thirty-two delegates of Clarion Clubs, eighty-six delegates of the S.D.P. and forty-eight of Socialist Societies and Labour Representation Committees, representing in all an estimated total of 35,000 members. At this conference, the British Socialist Party was established.

The new party aimed at the achievement of socialism, declaring meanwhile its support for "all measures that tend to protect the life and health of the workers and to strengthen their struggle against the capitalist class". It declared its methods to be

"the education of the people in the principles of Socialism; the closest possible co-operation with trade union organisations, and the advocacy of industrial unity of all workers as essential to bring about the socialisation of production"; and the establishment of "a militant Socialist Party in Parliament and local bodies, independent of all parties which support the capitalist system."  
(*Report of the First Annual Congress of the B.S.P., 1912.*)

<sup>1</sup> "Guild Socialism" was a theory evolved by groups of middle-class intellectual socialists, particularly at the universities, who attempted to adapt the idea of syndicalism to the conditions of British parliamentary politics because they felt the inadequacy of the trade union movement alone as a means of transforming society. In the form of an organisation for the propaganda of these ideas, they established in 1915 what was in effect a new political party, the National Guilds League, aiming to replace capitalism and the capitalist state by Guild Socialism, in which each union would take charge of its respective industry. By the side of a parliament of trade unions, or guilds, there should be established a second parliament of the population as a whole, in the role of consumers. This movement, confused as it was, did for a time win the support of many militant trade unionists and socialists, and was a stage in the evolution of some of them towards Marxism; others, such as William Mellor, Bertrand Russell, R. H. Tawney, Clifford Allen, George Lansbury and W. N. Ewer later became well-known opponents of Marxism in a variety of fields.

The formation of the B.S.P. was "accompanied by a noticeable increase of virility in the rank and file". (T. A. Jackson, *Solo Trumpet*, 1953, p. 96.) The party itself began to respond more directly to the trade union unrest: its first year of activity saw 200,000 leaflets issued to the railwaymen and miners during their national disputes, and speakers were sent to the coal-fields during the strike. At the first annual conference, in 1912, Hyndman's presidential address itself emphasised the importance of the activity of socialists in the recent strikes, and of their keeping "in close touch with the daily work of the organised unions (of which so many of them are members)". He welcomed the combined action of skilled and unskilled as one of the most satisfactory features of the strikes; and a special policy resolution pledged the active support of the B.S.P. to the trade unions, urging every eligible member to join his union and declaring that "it is the obvious duty of the party" to organise the unorganised.

In the following year, 1912-13, the B.S.P. played an active part in the transport workers' strike, its branches organising the feeding of strikers' children, often at party premises, and collecting funds all over the country. It joined actively in the campaign in support of Tom Mann imprisoned for declaring, during the 1912 miners' strike, his support for an appeal to soldiers not to shoot strikers. And it carried on—alone—a campaign against the raising of the Plimsoll Line, a diminution of the safety factor "dooming large numbers of seamen to death by drowning".

Thus, although there were still curious cross-currents in the B.S.P.—many of its members were still prepared to concentrate all its energies on propaganda, some opposing women's suffrage, some opposing any campaign for immediate reforms—the party as a whole had its face set towards increasingly active participation in the mass struggles now proceeding in the industrial field. But a new and fateful issue had already arisen, revealing a sharp cleavage on a fundamental question of socialist policy—that of nationalism or internationalism, of support for, or unflinching opposition to, imperialist war.

The period after 1907, when Tsarist Russia was brought into the Anglo-French alliance, while imperial Germany was trying to get a "place in the sun" for itself in Morocco, was one of constantly growing international tension. Armaments began

to be piled up at terrifying speed; more and more jingo propaganda was heard, on both sides of the Rhine and the North Sea.

Naturally, the socialist movement in all countries was deeply affected. In August, 1907, the International Congress at Stuttgart adopted unanimously a resolution denouncing militarism and war as instruments of the capitalist class; the duty of Social Democrats was to rouse the masses to fight the war peril, but, if war did break out, they should use the crisis which it brought "to accelerate the fall of the bourgeoisie". The resolution was reaffirmed at the Copenhagen Congress in August and September, 1910, and the Basle International Socialist Congress in November, 1912.

From 1909 onwards, however, Hyndman had been campaigning for a "Big Navy" in reply to the German "menace", and for preparations to fight Germany; his articles in *Justice* and *The Clarion* (Blatchford shared these views) were in spirit the very opposite of international socialism. He met strong opposition from Theodore Rothstein, John McLean and others. At the last S.D.P. conference in Coventry in April, 1911, there was a crop of branch resolutions denouncing Hyndman's policy and a stand-up battle took place between Zelda Kahan (Central Hackney), the principal spokesman of the opposition, and the whole executive, which, however, managed to get the Hackney resolution defeated by only forty-seven votes to thirty-three.

The struggle was renewed after the formation of the B.S.P., when Zelda Kahan and the Rev. Conrad Noel were elected to the E.C. in 1912. In December of that year, the E.C. adopted, by a majority of one, a proposal by Zelda Kahan declaring that "the armies and navies of modern capitalist states are maintained and employed only in the interests of the capitalist classes of those states", and that "so far as the workers are concerned, there is nothing to choose between German and British imperialism and aggression". It dissociated itself from the propaganda for increased naval expenditure—a plain censure on Hyndman.

Threats of resignations led to the suspension of the resolution three months later; but the issue was fought out again at the party's Blackpool conference in May, 1913. Hyndman was forced to declare that he would henceforth keep his views to himself; and the conference carried, with only nine dissentients,

a resolution pledging the B.S.P., "as an integral part of the International Socialist Party, bound by the resolutions on war of Stuttgart, 1907, and Basle, 1912", to pursue the same policy of opposition to armaments as the French and German socialists were following, "with the object of checking the growth of all forms of militarism". Hyndman was not re-elected chairman, and indeed, only two members of the old E.C. were re-elected.

Lenin, who in 1911 had condemned the decision of the Coventry conference as an unprecedented "disgrace" for British Social-Democracy—"never had its sectarian character shown itself so vividly" (*Works*, Russian 4th edition, Vol. 17, p. 147)—was now triumphant. "The British Social Democrats—to their honour be it said—have not put up with this disgrace and scandal, but fought hotly against it", he wrote of Hyndman's attitude (May, 1913). Hyndman's defeat was "a great success for British Socialism": the British Social Democrats "would have lost the right to combat the opportunists of the so-called 'Independent (of Socialism but dependent on the Liberals) Labour Party' if they had not rebelled sharply against the nationalist sins of their Executive." (*Works*, Russian 4th edition, vol. 19, p. 75.)

The defeat of Hyndman<sup>1</sup> and of a pro-imperialist policy, in fact, was more than a coincidence: it prepared the way for a still more significant and decisive revolt, which occurred during the World War which was soon to break out.

In July, 1913, on the occasion of a by-election at Leicester, the E.C. of the Labour Party unexpectedly refused to endorse a candidate put up by the local Labour Party. The reason was that there were two seats at Leicester, of which Ramsay MacDonald, the I.L.P. leader who was at that time also leader of the Labour Party, held one; and the Labour and I.L.P. leaders had a secret agreement with the Liberals not to contest the other. The B.S.P. then put up their own man—a famous socialist propagandist and Bradford City councillor, Edward Hartley; all delegates to the local Labour Party, except one, supported him, but the Labour Chief Whip issued a statement, through the Liberal Press, denouncing him.

The voting in this essentially working-class constituency is a

<sup>1</sup> He was elected for a brief spell by the districts represented by Quelch, on the latter's death, but did not stand in 1914.



useful reminder of those days—Liberal, 10,863; Tory, 9,729; and Socialist, 2,580. But Lenin's comment was:

"The class-conscious workers of various countries are often 'tolerant' of the British Independents. This is a great mistake. The *betrayal* of the workers' cause by the Independents at Leicester is not an accident, but the result of the *entire* opportunist policy of the 'Independent Labour Party'. The sympathy of all *real* Social Democrats must be on the side of those British Social Democrats who are resolutely fighting against the Liberal corruption of the workers by the 'Independent' Labour Party in Britain." (Lenin, *op. cit.*, p. 244.)

And in the obituary article on Harry Quelch which Lenin wrote in September that year (quoted earlier), he once again underlined both his appreciation of the new trends in the B.S.P. and his confidence that its fidelity, through all errors, to Marxism would before long bring important results:

"It is true that their isolation from the masses sometimes put a certain sectarian stamp upon the British Social Democrats. Hyndman, the leader and founder of Social-Democracy in Britain, has sunk into chauvinism. But the Social-Democratic Party has rebuffed him, and over the whole of Britain, *only* the British Social Democrats have for decades carried on systematic propaganda and agitation in the spirit of Marxism. This is the very great historical service that Quelch and his comrades have rendered. The fruits of the work of the Marxist Quelch will tell with full force in the next few years of the British Labour Movement." (Lenin, *op. cit.*, p. 333.)

Another important development came in July, 1913, when the International Bureau convened a meeting in London of the socialist organisations in Britain to consider the question of unity. The meeting, attended by representatives of the B.S.P., the I.L.P. and the Fabian Society, was urged by Emile Vandervelde and C. Huysmans, on behalf of the Bureau, to adopt a two-fold policy: the B.S.P. should affiliate to the Labour Party and the I.L.P. should fuse with the B.S.P. Agreement was reached on affiliation to the Labour Party and on the establishment of a United Socialist Council.

The ensuing conference, in December, was attended by many distinguished leaders of the international labour and socialist movement: representatives of Belgium, Russia, France, Germany, Austria, Argentina, America and many other countries

were present, together with delegations of leading members of the British organisations. The B.S.P.'s case was put by Dan Irving, and, in a conciliatory speech, Keir Hardie agreed to three of the four stipulations made by the B.S.P. These were that the party should be free to state its socialist aim, its recognition of the existence of the class war and of the necessity to assist, both inside and outside the House of Commons, the trade unions and other organised workers in their efforts to hold their own against capitalism. On the fourth stipulation, that B.S.P. candidates should stand as socialists, it was agreed by the three British bodies to submit to their organisations the question of asking the Labour Party to modify its constitution so as to allow a candidate to call himself a "Labour and Socialist" candidate. It was agreed to hold joint demonstrations to promote socialist unity.

In the spring of 1914, a referendum in the B.S.P. showed a majority for socialist unity and affiliation to the Labour Party. Application for affiliation was made in June, 1914, and was referred to the next Labour Party Conference. This, owing to the outbreak of war, was not held until 1916, when the B.S.P.'s application for affiliation was accepted unanimously. The Fabian Society and the I.L.P., after war broke out, refused to proceed with the establishment of the United Socialist Council which had been agreed upon.

### 3. *The Industrial Struggle*

The evolution of socialist policy and organisation just described took place against a background of gigantic industrial struggles, which began with the seamen and dockers.

In 1910, Mann and Tillett formed the National Federation of Transport Workers' Unions, and in the following year, Mann, at the invitation of Havelock Wilson, helped in the rebuilding of the Seamen's and Firemen's Union. Conditions in the industry were foul and humiliating, and the International Shipping Federation refused employment to union members. In June, 1911, however, when the s.s. *Olympic*, the world's largest liner, called at Southampton for coaling, the coalies struck for better conditions and a seamen's strike was declared in all ports. Within a few days the men gained all their demands, thus inflicting a severe defeat on the Federation, which had dictated conditions for twenty years.

This prompt and decisive action opened a period of determined strikes by dockers and transport workers, notably in London and Liverpool. In Liverpool, where Mann was chairman of the transport workers' Joint Strike Committee, the movement continued without interval after the seamen's victory. Thousands of low-paid railwaymen came out with such determination that their union executives were constrained to support what had started as an unofficial movement. A general lock-out by the port authorities was followed by the declaration of a general transport strike now involving 80,000 men who, acting in discipline and unity under Mann's leadership, completely controlled the city's transport.

The Government tried strong-arm tactics: two gunboats anchored in the Mersey; the Home Secretary, Winston Churchill, had 7,000 troops and special police moved in. A brutal police charge was delivered on a demonstration on St. George's Hall plateau. Two workers were killed when troops opened fire on a group who had tried to stop a prison van. But violence was in vain: the workers were inspired by the confidence and blazing defiance which marked Mann's leadership. "Let Churchill do his utmost," he declared. "Let him order ten times more military to Liverpool and let every street be paraded by them, not all the king's forces with all the king's men can take the vessels out of the docks to sea." In the end the employers and the authorities had to face this fact and to negotiate settlements favourable to the men.

Meanwhile, the Port of London was closed down by a demonstration of workers' power such as had not been seen since the heroic days of 1889. The dockers demanded that their "tanner" should be increased to 8*d.*, with 1*s.* an hour for overtime, and other demands were put forward for the other sections of port workers. Negotiations were refused by the Port of London Authority, and again at the instance of Churchill, the War Office strengthened the London garrison and threatened to send 25,000 troops to do the dockers' work. But the workers were not to be browbeaten: solidarity grew with the mounting tension: vast meetings were held daily on Tower Hill and as many as 100,000 people took part in the supporting marches. For four days, the strike committee headed by Harry Gosling, Will Godfrey and Ben Tillett was a real power in London. The P.L.A. and the the Shipping Federation were

compelled to concede the men's demands and to recognise the unions. The following year, when the Glasgow dockers were also out, saw another clash in London, where the employers broke the agreement of the previous year and an indecisive outcome resulted from lack of support from other areas.

Immediately arising out of the Liverpool struggle came the national railway strike, for which the demand arose after unofficial stoppages there, in Manchester and elsewhere. The leaders of the railway unions sent a twenty-four-hour ultimatum to the employers, on whose behalf the Government at once intervened, informing the union leaders that military force would be used to break a strike. Strong forces of troops were sent to Manchester and elsewhere at the request not of the civil authorities but of the railway companies. A demonstration was fired on at Llanelly, causing two fatal casualties. Popular indignation rose to white heat, and though the strike was not complete, the action of 200,000 railwaymen was formidable enough to force the Government to retreat. The employers were compelled to meet the unions for the first time; and under threat of further strike action an agreement was reached under which the Conciliation Boards were formed. They were now permitted to have trade unionists as secretaries—which amounted to a face-saving device for granting practical recognition of the unions.

The miners, meanwhile, were already on the move. The prelude was the strike of 10,000 employees of the Cambrian Combine in the Rhondda Valleys over the question of payment for abnormal places in the pits. The arrogance of the owners stirred up angry demonstrations: at Tonypandy, Metropolitan police and troops clashed with strikers, and all through the following year local strikes continued in the area.

The Miners' Federation got nowhere in its efforts to deal nationally with the issue of abnormal places and to negotiate for district minima. At the end of 1911 a ballot taken on a national strike to establish the principle of the minimum wage, 5s. a shift for men, 2s. for boys, showed a majority of 445,800 to 115,271 for a strike. By March 1st next year, a million miners, unionists and non-unionists alike, had left the pits in the most extensive and complete stoppage in the history of the British industry. Once more the Government moved quickly to make concessions, rushing through Parliament the Minimum

Wage Act which laid down measures for determining district minima. This by no means met the miners' demands, which were for a national minimum wage, but when a ballot showed an insufficient majority for continuing the strike, a delegate conference agreed to end it, after the Prime Minister himself had attended the meeting to plead with them to return to work.

Characteristic of this period of fierce and open struggle was the episode of the famous "Don't Shoot" appeal to the troops, who were being repeatedly used in the big strikes. In January, 1912, *The Syndicalist* reprinted the appeal, written by a Liverpool building worker, which had first appeared in Connolly's paper *The Irish Worker*.

"You are Workingmen's Sons," it declared. "When We go on strike to better our lot, which is the lot also of your Fathers, Mothers, Brothers and Sisters, you are called upon by your Officers to MURDER US. Don't do it."

Fred Crowsley, a railwayman who distributed the article as a leaflet at Aldershot, was imprisoned for four months; the editor of *The Syndicalist* for nine, and the printers for six. Next month, pointing to the concentration of troops during the miners' strike, Tom Mann read the appeal, declaring he believed every sentence of it. After a sensational trial, he too was given a six months' sentence.

These were only the greatest single engagements in the "Great Unrest"; what one contemporary observer described as "a general spirit of revolt" was sweeping through the working class. Nearly every branch of industry was affected, and for many industries and areas these were the really decisive years of trade union advance. The Black Country strike of 1913 brought workers in one of the most backward and oppressed areas into organisation for the first time. Workers in depressed industries, such as the Devon and Cornish clay-workers and the unskilled woollen operatives of Yorkshire, and in new industries such as the semi-skilled engineers of the Midlands, really learned for the first time what a trade union was.

Much of the influx of membership went into the General Unions founded by the Marxists in the late 'eighties—the Dockers and Gasworkers, but especially into the Workers' Union, which Tom Mann founded in 1898. While the older

General Unions, especially the Gasworkers under J. R. Clynes, were already moving to the right, the Workers' Union retained the fighting spirit and leadership of its founder, and thus became the spearhead of advance in the backward and rural areas. (It merged with the Transport and General Workers' Union in 1929.)

Particularly important new developments in union organisation took place among three sections: women, and agricultural and clerical workers.

Under the leadership of Mary MacArthur, the hitherto unorganised women and girls in tailoring shops and food factories fought and won strikes and enrolled in the National Federation of Women Workers. The outstanding action in this field was the Bermondsey women's "rising" during the London dock strike of 1911. Women of the jam, glue and pickles factories of the neighbourhood poured out into the streets, shouting and singing. Fifteen thousand of them cheered Ben Tillett at a meeting in Southwark park, and within three weeks, employers at eighteen out of twenty factories had agreed to wage increases. Significant too was the link between this new militant movement of working-class women and the left-wing of the suffragette movement, at this time at the peak of the fight for votes for women. The importance of this unity was clearly understood by the Pethick-Lawrences, Keir Hardie, George Lansbury (who himself went to gaol for the cause) and Sylvia Pankhurst, who left her mother and sister, the leaders of the middle-class suffragette movement, and turned to the East End workers.

Ever since the heroic days of Joseph Arch in the 'seventies, organisation among farm workers had been weak. Temporary unions had been organised in the years after 1889, and again on a smaller scale in 1898-1900. Now, however, the foundations of a firm organisation were laid. In Norfolk, that old stronghold of the farm workers' movement, George Edwards—"a wonderful sower of the good seed was this man George Edwards", said one of his old mates—decided to restart the old union after the Liberal-Labour victory in 1906. It was a hard fight. The labourers struck and lost, but in the course of the struggle, they discovered that their true friends were not the old Liberal leaders in whom they had believed, but the socialists; hence during the period of the Great Unrest there were several socialists in the union's leadership. Meanwhile, the Workers'

Union had also started to organise on the farms, chiefly in Yorkshire, Herefordshire and later especially in the West Country—Wiltshire and thereabouts. In 1913, a new and powerful ally appeared on the scene in the form of the rapidly expanding National Union of Railwaymen; in many a village the local railwaymen, independent of squire and parson, became unofficial trade union organisers for rural workers. From 1912 strikes began, many of them small local affairs though some were on a big scale; and very often the workers won. By the outbreak of war in 1914, the National Union of Agricultural Workers which Edwards had founded had 360 branches with 15,000 members, and the Workers' Union was also strong, with members streaming in every week. The unions were to take a hard knock in the depression after the war, but from now onwards they were here to stay.

Finally, the years of the Great Unrest saw a real breakthrough for trade unionism among white-collar workers with the foundation of what was to become the Civil Service Clerical Association.

The greatest battle of 1913 was in Dublin, where 80,000 workers led by James Larkin and James Connolly defied an all-out attempt by intimidation and police terror (two strikers were killed and 400 wounded) to smash the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union. Larkin had founded the union in 1908, shortly after helping Grayson to win the Colne Valley seat. In 1910, he was joined by Connolly, whose cool judgment and theoretical knowledge were a valuable balance to Larkin's tempestuous oratory and rather difficult temperament. The Union's membership grew rapidly, and the frightened employers organised resistance under the leadership of William Murphy, chairman of Dublin Tramways Company, and one of Ireland's leading capitalists.

In September, 1913, employees of many firms in Murphy's association were told to leave the Union or be dismissed. They stood firm and the great lock-out and general strike began. The sympathy of trade unionists all over Britain was deep and strong: the dispatch of a food ship from the Co-operative Movement was its most notable expression, but there were also sympathetic strikes by railwaymen. Keir Hardie declared that unless the threat to trade unionism was defeated in Dublin, they would have to fight the battle over again in Britain.

In the heat of the struggle, illusions were swept away and new ideas began to grow. Robert Smillie, president of the Miners' Federation, gave a glimpse of new horizons when he told the T.U.C.: "If revolution is going to be forced on to my people by such action as has been taken in Dublin and elsewhere, I say it is our duty, legal or illegal, to train our people to defend themselves. . . . It is the duty of the greater trade union movement, when a question of this gravity arises, to discuss seriously a strike of all the workers."

Not all the leaders of the British movement shared the generous sentiments of the active rank-and-file, however: Philip Snowden, who had acquired a terrible reputation as the "English Robespierre" from his forcible expositions of middle-class radical economic theories, chose this moment to declare that strikes "demoralise" the workers; and James Sexton of the Dockers' Union, Havelock Wilson of the Seamen's Union, and J. H. Thomas of the National Union of Railwaymen were active in preventing the extension of aid to whole-hearted official support.

The locked-out men were finally forced back to work by starvation. But their struggle was not in vain: public enquiries during the lock-out had exposed the employers and the appalling housing conditions in Dublin, while the connections of the Irish Nationalist Parliamentary Party with the capitalists had been shown up. Most important of all for the future, the Irish Citizens' Army with its banner of the Plough and the Stars, established during the struggle to defend the men and their families from police brutality, was to form under Connolly's leadership the main force of the Easter rising of 1916.

The struggles we have described above were only the outstanding single actions in a wave of industrial revolt which grew in size and extent as the outbreak of war approached. The spirit of the time was well expressed in the slogan "Strike and strike hard" carried by the *Daily Herald*. This paper, founded as a strike sheet of the London compositors in 1911, started on its political career in the following year with George Lansbury, a former supporter of the Social Democratic Federation's *Bow and Bromley Worker*, as editor. "Wait till the autumn" was the phrase on everyone's lips in the summer of 1914, when, in the words of the Webbs, British trade unionism was "working up for an almost revolutionary outburst of gigantic industrial



disputes". With the outbreak of war, however, the strike wave died away.

How are we to estimate this remarkable period of working-class struggle? The theory of syndicalism, although it inspired the militant rank-and-file leaders at the time, did not strike deep roots in the British working class outside a few areas. But, apart from the basic concept of an expropriatory general strike, the ideas put forward by the syndicalist school—for 100 per cent. unionism, the sympathetic strike and an aggressive trade policy—and its criticism of existing trade union weaknesses certainly caught the imagination of the mass of organised workers. And as always when they go forth in strength, the movement as a whole gained in numbers, power and confidence. In this short period of four years, trade union membership grew from less than 2,500,000 to nearly four million. The biggest gains were in transport—half a million—where some of the toughest and biggest battles were fought.

Several important changes in trade union organisation were made in this period as a result of the new ideas and militancy. The biggest of these developments was the foundation in 1913 of the National Union of Railwaymen, from a fusion of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants (the largest organisation in the industry, with 132,000 members), the General Railway Workers' Union (with 20,000 members) and the small United Pointsmen and Signalmen. The Railway Clerks' Association and the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen did not join. The new union stood for a new policy—the organisation of every man in the industry—a policy which led to demarcation disputes, particularly in the railway shops. But the very fact of its formation caused total membership to double to 300,000 in eighteen months. The constitution of the new organisation concentrated great powers in the hands of the executive.

The spirit of reform was also agitating the ranks of the A.S.E., and one of the results of a period of complicated internal struggles was the decision in 1912 to modify the constitution and open the union to unskilled members, though this was rescinded three years later and it was not until 1920 that the bulk of the societies in the industry joined to form the Amalgamated Engineering Union, with Tom Mann as General Secretary.

In the building industry, the movement for reform, though powerful and determined in the rank-and-file of all the unions concerned, was largely frustrated by official opposition and traditional craft jealousies. The decision by ballot in 1912 in favour of amalgamation was not operated, and two years later the industrial unionists, abandoning their firm policy of reforming the old unions rather than starting new ones, decided to form the Building Workers' Industrial Union. But it met with no real success, partly owing to the immediate outbreak of the World War in 1914.

One important gain for reform was the establishment of the Triple Alliance of the M.F.G.B., the N.U.R. and the Transport Workers' Federation, (which had been formed in 1910 by the dockers and transport workers' unions). This pact of mutual aid between the organisations which had fought the biggest battles of this period was agreed on the proposal of the miners' leaders.

Through the ceaseless activity and many-sided conflicts of these stormy years, therefore, the working-class movement was gaining strength rapidly, not only in numbers but in organisation and co-ordination. The eyes of the workers were being opened to the realities of class society: to take but one outstanding example, the lesson was not lost when, just before the war, the Tory landlords and Army officers who had prepared mutiny at the Curragh in their determination to prevent Irish Home Rule escaped scot-free, while the workers associated with the "Don't Shoot" appeal had been sent to prison. In the socialist movement too, despite all the errors and prejudices inherited from the past, there was growing appreciation of the need for a party with revolutionary purity in its ideas, but capable in its practical activities of making common cause with all those oppressed or threatened by capitalism.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE IMPERIALIST WAR

#### 1. *The Nature of the War*

THE thunder of the guns in the summer of 1914 marked the opening of a new epoch for all humanity. International tensions, which had mounted for decades as imperialist finance capitalism assumed growing power in the "advanced countries" and sought hungrily for new markets and sources of raw materials, now reached breaking-point. Between 1876 and 1914, as Lenin noted, the six "great nations" (Britain, Russia, France, Germany, Japan and America) grabbed a territory two and a half times the size of Europe, and at the end of the period held enslaved over 500 million colonial people. Literally, he said, "several hundred billionaires and millionaires hold in their hands the fate of the whole world". Such gigantic expansion must give rise to conflicts, and with the world parcelled out, the next phase must be a *redivision* of the spoils, determined by the changing economic and military power of the contestants.

By 1914, two rival groups of Powers faced one another, armed to the teeth. On one side, the main protagonists were the older imperialisms of Britain and France, in alliance with Tsarist Russia; on the other were the German and Austrian Empires. Germany, now a fully-fledged finance capitalist state, but far behind in the race for colonies owing to her late development, planned to wrest colonial territories from Britain and France and to seize Poland, the Ukraine and the Baltic Provinces from Russia. Russia, bolstered up by French loans since the early 'nineties and since the 1905 Revolution by British and Belgian loans and investments, also planned to partition Turkey and to wrest provinces from Austria. Britain sought to smash Germany as a threatening economic rival and to make gains in the Middle East. France had her eyes on the coal and steel centres of the Saar and Alsace-Lorraine.

When the conflict was finally precipitated, however, the justifications for waging war bore no relation to these real

objectives. Britain—in alliance with Tsarist Russia, which had rightly been called “the prison house of the peoples”—fought avowedly in defence of “gallant little” Belgium. The Germans, whose general staff had long worked out plans for aggressive warfare, were told that they fought to defend themselves from “Russian barbarism” and for the “liberation” of Poland. The French people were made to believe that they fought for the defence of “*la Patrie*” against the infamous “*Boche*”; the Russians were given to understand that they fought simply to stave off the onslaught of Prussian militarism.

In the first phase of the war, most of the people in all countries were deceived by these and similar claims. Ten million of the flower of Europe’s manhood—the best part of a million from Britain alone—were to be sacrificed on the battlefields of Europe and the Middle East before exhaustion and the mounting revolutionary temper of the workers and servicemen in all countries brought peace and smashed the empires of Germany, Austria and Russia.

The European socialist leaders had long foreseen the broad outlines of this conflagration. In 1912, the Basle Congress of the Second International, as we have seen, re-endorsed the resolution of the Stuttgart Congress five years earlier. But for most of the socialist leaders, it was merely a pious aspiration, with little relation to “practical” politics. Soon, with the exception of the Russian Bolsheviks and a few groups and outstanding individuals in other countries, the socialist leaders were either cowed or carried away by the wave of jingoism, and rallied to the support of their respective ruling classes for the prosecution of the war.

## 2. *British Labour and the War*

The testing time of war quickly brought into sharp relief the weaknesses and divisions of the British working-class movement; it also showed, as the situation matured, the movement’s mighty reserves of courageous devotion and mass strength, as a result of which it emerged from the war markedly more powerful and politically aware than in 1914.

The anti-war campaign, led by the socialists in support of the principles of the International, was brief and ineffective. On August 1st, after the Austrians had declared war on Serbia, Keir Hardie and Arthur Henderson, representing the British

Section of the International Socialist Bureau, issued a manifesto calling for "vast demonstrations against war in every industrial centre", and making this passionate appeal:

"Compel those of the governing class and their Press who are eager to commit you to co-operate with Russian despotism to keep silence and respect the decision of the overwhelming majority of the people, who will have neither part nor lot in such infamy. The success of Russia at the present day would be a curse to the world. . . . Workers, stand together therefore for peace! Combine and conquer the militarist enemy and the self-seeking imperialists to-day, once and for all. . . . Down with class rule! Down with the rule of brute force! Down with war! Up with the peaceful rule of the people!" (Quoted from Allen Hutt, *This Final Crisis*, 1935, p. 220.)

Next day, Henderson, Hardie, Lansbury, Thorne and other leaders addressed a demonstration in Trafalgar Square, where a resolution declared:

"We stand by the efforts of the international working-class movement to unite the workers of the nations concerned in their efforts to prevent their governments from entering upon war. . . . The Government of Great Britain should rigidly decline to engage in war, but should confine itself to efforts to bring about peace as speedily as possible."

On August 5th, the day after the British declaration of war on Germany, however, an emergency conference of Labour organisations in fact confined itself to a series of resolutions on measures to "mitigate the destitution" which it was foreseen the war would bring upon the working class. To this end, the War Emergency Workers' National Committee was set up, and the Labour Party executive advised all organisations to concentrate on relief measures. Thus was begun the rapid descent down the slope to complete collaboration, which was reached within a few weeks. On August 8th, MacDonald declared: "Whatever our view may be on the origin of the war, we must go through with it." The annual meeting of the Trades Union Congress was postponed, and in fact never took place. On August 24th, the trade union and parliamentary leadership declared an "industrial truce", and five days later the Labour Party executive endorsed the decision of the Labour M.Ps. to join in an "all-party" recruiting campaign: Henderson became

a president of the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee together with the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. Three weeks later, the B.S.P. executive, under the influence of the ideas of Hyndman, issued a statement supporting recruitment to the forces: "The party naturally desires to see the prosecution of the war to a speedy and successful issue", it said.

Thus the working-class movement in Britain, which had been growing so rapidly in strength and consciousness, was momentarily thrown into disarray. The leadership had quickly abandoned the principles of the International and was swept along with the jingoist tide. Thousands of workers went flocking to the colours, drawn, as William Gallacher says, by the "terrible attraction" of war—"the wild excitement, the illusion of wonderful adventure and the actual break in the deadly monotony of working-class life." (W. Gallacher, *Revolt on the Clyde*, 1936, p. 18.) There was thus at this time no independent leadership of national scope, for the official machinery of the movement, without which it would have been impossible to continue the war, had been placed in support of ruling-class policies. ("If organised labour had been against the war, it is safe to say that the national effort could not have been maintained", say the Webbs, *op. cit.*, p. 692.)

It was from the rank-and-file of the socialist and trade union organisations, therefore, that a new independent leadership began slowly to grow up. We have already noted the strength of pacifist sentiment in the I.L.P., an attitude which in the case of militant working-class members of the party often merged into a position of principled, political opposition to the war. More important, however, was the attitude of the B.S.P. membership: here for a short time there was a widespread feeling of frustration arising from the policy of the E.C., but from the start a substantial part of the rank-and-file, soon to become the majority, opposed the war on political grounds. The recruiting manifesto of September, 1914, "set the party aflame" (Lee and Archbold, *op. cit.*, p. 227), and resolutions for and against it poured into headquarters. Among the critics of the pro-war group led by Hyndman, H. W. Inkpin declared: "It is a capitalist war because it is the outcome of the antagonism from the need of capitalist production to secure markets for its surplus, and of the military and diplomatic policy that has

been built up around those antagonisms." (Quoted *ibid.*, p. 230.) Theodore Rothstein resigned from the party in protest against its betrayal of socialism, but almost immediately began active steps to bring the most determined of its members together on a platform of struggle against the war. As well as H. W. Inkpin, these included his brother Albert Inkpin (general secretary of the B.S.P. and later of the Communist Party), Joe Fineberg and E. C. Fairchild.

Thus began a period of bitter struggle between the pro-war majority of the leadership of the B.S.P. and the mass of the membership, engaged in local branch activities, whose strength and clarity of ideas grew as the popular movement revived. But for a time, the leadership kept to its course. In February, 1915, the B.S.P. was represented along with the I.L.P., Fabian Society and Labour Party at a conference in London of socialist organisations of the Allied powers. This conference declared that while it would not ignore "the profound general causes of the European conflict, itself a monstrous product of the antagonisms which tear asunder capitalist society, and of the policy of colonial dependencies and aggressive imperialism, a victory for German imperialism would be the defeat and destruction of democracy in Europe". A "National Socialist Defence Committee" was formed, later to be superseded by the British Workers' Defence League, which, significantly, developed into a violently anti-socialist organisation.

The two trends were now becoming clearer, and the anti-war trend was gaining the majority in the B.S.P. At the divisional conferences of the party which took the place of a national conference in the spring of 1915, an Edinburgh resolution of confidence in the executive was defeated by seventy-eight votes to seventy. A Central Hackney resolution deploring the recruiting campaign was carried by fifty-nine votes to fifty-six, but on the other hand, a motion for the withdrawal of the recruiting statement was defeated by sixty-seven votes to fifty-seven. Opinion was thus still undecided, but the influence of the pro-war leadership was on the wane. As early as December, 1915, the executive decided by five votes to four to take the opinion of the branches about joining the International Socialist Commission set up by the conference of internationalist socialists at Zimmerwald (see below), denounced by all jingoes; and by a very large majority, the branches endorsed the

proposal. The final defeat of the old leaders in the following year was part of the revival of the mass movement, both nationally and internationally, to which we must now turn.

### 3. *Mass Movement and Repression*

The industrial truce and the all-party recruiting campaign, though they confused and diverted the working class for a time, did not alter the realities of the capitalist system. The hardship and exploitation which had produced the Great Unrest were now intensified by the war. Men were needed in their tens and hundreds of thousands for the costly battles of the Western Front. The Government was constantly demanding more and yet more munitions; this had rightly been described as the "first engineers' war". Shortage of manpower and demand for increased production gave rise to intensified exploitation and the demand by the employers for the recruitment of women and unskilled men, thus raising anew in sharp form the problem which had been posed by the development of mass production. And it was not only the engineering employers who were interested in this question; the whole capitalist class sought to take advantage of the war conditions and specious appeals to patriotism to sweep away the defences of trade unionism and lay the working class open to unrestricted exploitation. The war was terribly profitable. In every field, profiteering was rampant as shortages developed; prices of food and clothing shot up, as did rents, stimulated by the increased movement of population to the industrial centres. A few sections of workers did make high earnings, but as the war went on prices outstripped wages, thus inflicting widespread hardship upon the working class. For the capitalists, on the other hand, war was a boon; their profits have been estimated to have increased by £4,000 m. during and owing to the war.

From the dawning realisation that their patriotism was being exploited for private gain and that the war situation was being used as an opportunity to destroy the real power of trade unionism and to shackle the whole working class under military and industrial conscription, there now emerged a new forward movement. Its leadership inevitably came from below, as the official apparatus was collaborating closely with the employers and the Government, in which the Labour Party was given representation in May, 1915. (Indeed, this collaboration was



such that the Webbs, *op. cit.*, p. 635, characterised the war period as that of the "revolutionary transformation of the social and political standing of the official representatives of the trade union world"; the trade union apparatus was now recognised as "part of the social machinery of the state".)

The independent working-class movement first began to reform and gather strength not on a national scale but in the localities, centred round a variety of groups and individuals. The most notable area was the Clydeside. Here, intense anti-war and anti-militarist propaganda had been carried on for years by the B.S.P., the I.L.P. and the S.L.P., and the Great Unrest, which died away in most other parts of the country in August, 1914, continued almost undiminished. Real mass agitation and socialist education had produced a widespread political understanding which could resist the wave of jingoism.

In the forefront of this work was the indomitable John McLean, of the B.S.P. "His whole life centred in the fight for revolutionary socialism. Night after night he was on the streets or in the halls. In the summer, the long school holidays gave him new opportunities. . . . All over Scotland he went, rousing the workers for war against capitalism. Of medium height and sturdy build, he was a living dynamo of energy, driving, always driving towards his goal—the revolutionary struggle for power—the realisation of the Socialist Commonwealth." A great Marxist teacher and founder of the Scottish Labour College, he brought Marxism to crowds of young workers. "When war was declared, his energy and activity surpassed anything we had seen before. . . . Breathing hatred for the capitalist class and the destruction with which it threatened humanity, he went about the streets of Glasgow rousing the workers to a fury of anger against the war and the warmakers." (Gallacher, *op. cit.*, p. 20.)

Clydeside became a seething cauldron of unrest and clashing ideas, with sustained discussions and literature sales in the factories, study classes, open air meetings and demonstrations. (The first public anti-war meeting was held on Glasgow Green on August 9th, 1914.) A militant leadership from diverse sources began to grow up: McLean and William Gallacher of the B.S.P.; a group of S.L.P. members now breaking away from the stiff sectarianism of their party—the brilliant Arthur McManus (later to be chairman of the Communist Party);

J. W. Muir, thoughtful and sensitive; the generous but egotistical David Kirkwood, who was then about to leave the S.L.P. for the I.L.P. By November, says Gallacher (*ibid.*, p. 32), "the campaign against the war, against high prices and rents and for increased wages was in full blast. Housewives as well as factory workers were being brought into political activity." And a vital part of this agitation was the continuous stream of material supplied through the classes held by McLean, who was never "abstract", but applied his Marxist knowledge to events around him.

Bringing "into full relief the sinister robber forces" behind the war, "he gave example after example of the financiers and big employers pointing a gun at the head of the Government and demanding increased profits, and of other firms selling war material to neutrals with the full knowledge that they were being re-sold to Germany. These examples, with instances of increased prices for ordinary commodities and higher rents, were carried day after day into the factories. 'The boys at the front' were being slaughtered for profit and the very slaughter of the workers at the front was being used for increased robbery of the workers at home. War against the employers, against the 'profiteers', against the 'rack-renters' was now beginning to overshadow the 'war against Germany' in the minds of the Clyde workers." (*ibid.*, p. 38.)

The first major development arose out of a demand for 2d. an hour increase decided on by the engineers before the war began. The employers, relying on the anxious compliance of the official union leaderships, were able to delay and delay, until the explosion was touched off in February, 1915, by a new turn of events—the employment of Americans at G. and J. Weir's at better rates of pay. The shop stewards there decided on immediate strike action, which spread rapidly and with tremendous enthusiasm through the Clyde engineering shops, finally involving about 9,000 men at the eight most important firms.

A "Central Withdrawal of Labour Committee" was formed of delegates from the shops to direct the whole movement, and the strength of its support was shown in the rejection by 8,927 votes to 829 of the A.S.E. Executive's recommendation, made four days before the strike began, for acceptance of three farthings an hour increase. Under the combined pressure of the

union leaderships, the Government and the campaign of war hysteria which was unleashed against them, the strikers were compelled to give way. Their morale and solidarity were unimpaired, however, and it was as one body that they returned to work, three days after a Government ultimatum threatening compulsory arbitration had expired. The dispute was referred to arbitration and 1*d.* an hour with 10 per cent. increase in piece rates were awarded.

The Clyde strike was only one symptom, though by far the most outstanding, of the widespread revival of industrial unrest in the winter of 1914-15. It was clear that the Government could no longer rely on the mere "good-will" of union leaderships whose authority had been thus sharply called into question. Early in 1915, therefore, the Government called the union leaders to a conference at the Treasury. There, an agreement was signed in accordance with which the right to strike was abandoned, customs restricting the output of munitions were abandoned and dilution of labour on government work was permitted. To secure this drastic undermining of the trade union position, the Government gave a number of promises, which were not carried out: the agreement was to apply only to war work; it was to last only for the duration of the war; dilutees were to get the rate for the job and there was to be limitation of profits.

But even these major concessions by the unions were not enough: in the summer, the Government introduced compulsion. A Ministry of Munitions was established and the Munitions of War Act was quickly passed, making the terms of the Treasury Agreement part of the law of the land, to be enforced by Munitions Tribunals established in the localities. A munitions worker was in future not to be allowed to change his job without a "leaving certificate" from his employer.

The Government's powers, however, could not stop the mass discontent which was growing apace in industry. Indeed, the very first time it attempted to apply them it had to beat a hasty retreat. In the coalfields, existing agreements were running out, and though in most areas new ones were reached by granting compromise concessions, in South Wales 200,000 miners struck in defiance of the Act. The Minister of Munitions, Lloyd George, had perforce to hurry off to that area and make a settlement conceding most of the men's demands.

The example of South Wales was not immediately followed elsewhere, but its effect was felt in a more cautious and conciliatory attitude on the part of the employers and the Government, who rightly saw in it a warning that the trade union officials might lose control. There were real grounds for this fear, for in factories, workshops and shipyards throughout Britain, a militant rank-and-file leadership was growing, though it still lacked national co-ordination.

Typical of the determination of the workers to defend trade union conditions was the strike of boilermakers at Southampton in September, 1915: Harry Pollitt gained early experience here. In the new and vital aircraft industry, a powerful agitation was carried on from the beginning of the war by a happy combination of union and workshop organisation. The unions worked together to set up the National Woodworkers' Aircraft Committee, which was later (November, 1917) to force concessions from the Minister of Munitions (Winston Churchill).

Meanwhile, on the Clyde, the Central Withdrawal of Labour Committee, still very much alive after the conclusion of the February strike, became a permanent organisation, named the Clyde Workers' Committee, with William Gallacher as chairman and J. M. Messer as secretary. Though it was by no means the equivalent of a political party, it consisted of politically conscious workers and was now giving a vigorous lead in campaigns which had direct political implications: notably the struggles against the Munitions Act and for the Rent Restrictions Act.

The Committee was expressing the deep anger of the Clyde workers when it described the support given to the Government by the trade union leaders over the Munitions Act as "grossest treachery to the working class". Its proclaimed objects were an absolute challenge not only to the Act but to capitalism itself: the Committee sought

"to obtain an ever increasing control over workshop conditions, to regulate the terms upon which workers shall be employed, and to organise the workers on a class basis and to maintain the class struggle until the overthrow of the wages system, the freedom of the workers and the establishment of industrial democracy have been attained."

Particular objection was taken by the workers to the leaving

certificate, on which a management could blacken a worker's character, but without which he could not leave his job. When two shipwrights were dismissed at Fairfields shipyard in August, 1915, with "for slacking" on their leaving certificates, the yard workers struck and all Clydeside stood angrily on the verge of a stoppage.

The other notably objectionable feature of the Act was the dilution clause. The Committee recognised that it was a "step in the direct line of industrial evolution" and would make labour more mobile and tend to increase output. But, it said, "this scheme of dilution must be carried out under the control of the workers . . . unless this demand was granted, they would fight the scheme to the death."

At the same time, the Committee lent effective support to the movement against rent increases which was already showing itself in wide and enthusiastic popular activity.

"In Govan," says Gallacher, "Mrs. Barbour, a typical working-class housewife, became the leader of a movement such as had never been seen before, or since for that matter. Street meetings, back court meetings, drums, bells, trumpets—every method was used to bring the women out and organise them for the struggle. Notices were printed by the thousand and put up in the windows: wherever you went you could see them. In street after street, scarcely a window without one: 'We are not paying increased rent.'" When evictions were attempted, Mrs. Barbour's team, who "could smell a sheriff's officer (bailiff) a mile away" called the women from their washing and cooking and before the officer and his men could get near their destination, they "would be met by an army of furious women who drove them back in a hurried scramble for safety." (*ibid.*, p. 53.)

A crisis was reached when eighteen munitions workers were summoned for non-payment of the increased rent. Nearly 10,000 engineers and shipyard workers left their work and marched to the court, at the same time sending a telegram informing the Government that unless action was taken the strike would continue. The cases were dismissed and the Rent Restriction Act was rushed through Parliament.

A notable victory had been won, but the Clyde men did not relent in their struggle against the even greater menace of the Munitions Act. When Lloyd George visited the Clyde with Arthur Henderson, the principal Labour Party representative

in the Cabinet, and tried to use his eloquence on the shop stewards, he was greeted with jeers and catcalls, very pointed heckling and the singing of the "Red Flag". The meeting ended in disorder.

The Government now abandoned its attempt at peaceful persuasion, and the two sides swayed back and forth in acute struggle. The Glasgow paper *Forward* was suppressed for printing a true account of Lloyd George's humiliation before the shop stewards, but the threat of strike action forced the lifting of the ban. A demand for 2d. an hour increase was rejected by the Committee on Production.

McLean, now ceaselessly engaged in a whirlwind campaign against the new menace of military conscription which was rousing nationwide protest even among those sections of the movement which had hitherto been compliant, was arrested on sedition charges. He conducted his own powerful and aggressive defence, but was sentenced to three years' imprisonment. James Maxton, the I.L.P. leader, was also goaled. The Clyde Workers' Committee's paper, *The Worker*, was suppressed, and Muir, its editor, and Gallacher, the chairman of the Committee, were sentenced to twelve months' imprisonment and the printer, Walter Bell, to three.

The next move by the employers provoked a new storm. Kirkwood, chairman of shop stewards at Parkhead Forge, was forbidden to visit other departments than his own in the course of his duties, and a general strike of Clyde engineers ensued, with the Workers' Committee once more in the lead. Eight leading shop stewards, including McManus, Messer and Kirkwood, were arrested in their beds and deported from the area. The movement was thus decapitated, and the men, angry but without leadership, were persuaded to return to work.

The blow to the movement on Clydeside was a serious one, but working-class unrest was now assuming nationwide dimensions, and other big industrial centres, such as London and Sheffield, followed the example of the Clyde in establishing workers' committees, as discontent was roused by the further measures of the Government. Conscription was introduced in the spring of 1916, and later the basis of exemption was altered; dilution was extended to private work and payment by results was extensively operated. The call-up was used to intimidate militants or get rid of them altogether—the work of the military

service tribunals was pleasantly known as the "comb-out". The power of the resentment which these measures inspired was illustrated by events at Sheffield, where the threat of strike action, backed by support in Barrow, secured the release of a skilled fitter from the Army.

Conscription also alienated the opinion of those members of the Labour Movement who had supported the war on a "voluntary" basis. The pacifists and conscientious objectors, strong in the I.L.P., many of whose members supported the No Conscription Fellowship, were now hard hit: nearly 9,000 court martials were held on them, and nearly 5,000 people were sent either to prison or to work schemes.

Government repression grew in all fields as popular anger mounted. Spies and agents provocateurs were widely used in factories and elsewhere; an outstanding case in which these gentry figured was that leading to the sentence of a man and three women to long terms of imprisonment for an alleged plot to poison Lloyd George and Arthur Henderson. Under the Defence of the Realm Act, Orders in Council could be issued making a crime of anything the Government disliked: heavy fines were imposed for serious discussion of the causes of the war, for pacifist propaganda, or even casual remarks. Police raids on houses became a common feature, and people were convicted merely for having old anti-conscription leaflets in their possession. The police would descend on places of entertainment, "round up" all the men and take off to the police station all those who could not show their papers. Books and pamphlets were seized; plays were banned; papers were suspended or suppressed; there was no right of appeal against police prohibition of meetings.

So far, however, from stamping out the unrest, repression had the effect of consolidating it, drawing together not only the workers in their factory struggles but also people of a variety of points of view opposed to the war: the pacifist supporters of the I.L.P. and the *Daily Herald*, the revolutionary socialists of the rank and file of the B.S.P., and honest Liberals such as E. D. Morel and his Union of Democratic Control, which sought to present the facts about the war unobscured by prejudice and militarist propaganda.

On a number of different but inter-related planes, the year 1916 saw some extremely important developments.

On the industrial front was achieved the beginning of the consolidation on a national scale of the 'rank-and-file' movement. This took the form of the National Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee Movement.

"The unit of organisation was the Shop Committee, composed of the stewards elected in the particular shop or department; representative of the various shop committees formed the Works or Plant Committee; these in turn sent their representatives to constitute the local or District Committees, which together elected the National Administrative Council of the movement. It was prescribed that stewards and all officers of the movement should be elected for six months, though eligible for re-election, and that frequent shop meetings should be held." (Hutt, *British Trade Unionism*, pp. 77-8.)

Minority trends of various shades of anti-war opinion were gaining strength in the working-class parties of all the belligerent countries in the early phase of the war, and at the end of 1915 awareness of this fact was giving new confidence to the opponents of war in each individual country. An important advance was made in September of that year when the anti-war sections held a conference at Zimmerwald, in Switzerland, which was attended by representatives from Germany, France, Italy, Russia, Poland and a number of neutral countries. Fairchild of the B.S.P. and Bruce Glasier of the I.L.P. were to have been present, but were unable to get passports. All the delegates opposed the war, but the majority of them would not advance at this stage beyond the pacifist position to the policy of revolutionary struggle against war advocated by Lenin and the left-wing. The conference did, however, denounce the war and call for opposition to it.

In Britain, the conference resulted in a distinct strengthening of internationalist opinion, and its influence was of particular importance to the B.S.P., among whose members support for a political and socialist opposition to the war was growing. Early in 1916, this movement within the Party was given a rallying point in *The Call*, a fortnightly publication founded by Rothstein (who wrote as John Bryan), Fairchild, Fineberg and Inkpin.

The consequence of the new clarity and coherence of opinion in the Party soon became manifest: at the 1916 annual conference at Salford, Hyndman and twenty-one supporters,



overwhelmingly defeated on the question whether the discussion of policy on the war should be held in public or in private,<sup>1</sup> withdrew after Hyndman had been booed and shouted down. They formed a National Socialist Advisory Committee, but the Party leadership then demanded that they should either wind up this committee or resign from the Party.

Hyndman and his supporters, however, went ahead to try to form a new party, the National Socialist Party, in which their jingoistic and right-wing views could develop without restraint. In 1918, this organisation assumed the old name of Social Democratic Federation. Meanwhile, the directors of the Twentieth Century Press refused to hand over the title and control of *Justice* to the B.S.P., and so *The Call*, as a weekly, became the Party's official organ.

World-shaking events were now approaching, and of these the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916 was at once a heroic prelude and an inspiration to the revolutionary movement. Its leader, James Connolly, a revolutionary of heroic cast, was closely connected with the labour movement in Scotland, and spoke at anti-war demonstrations there and in England in the early months of the war. At Glasgow on May Day, 1915, he said:

"War waged by oppressed nationalities against the oppressors, and the class war of the proletariat against capital . . . is par excellence the swiftest, safest and most peaceful form of constructive work the socialist can engage in."

The slogan: "We serve neither King nor Kaiser, but Ireland" was hung over Liberty Hall, the headquarters of the Irish Transport Workers' Union. When Connolly's paper, *The Irish Worker*, was suppressed in December, 1914, it reappeared in the following May as *The Workers' Republic*, printed by the Socialist Labour Press in Glasgow and smuggled into Dublin. By the end of 1915, the Irish Citizens' Army, aiming at a workers' republic, had made an alliance with the left-wing of the Irish Volunteers. Their bid for power in 1916 was smashed by 60,000 troops and a naval bombardment. Fifteen leaders were executed, among

<sup>1</sup> This was not a question of formalities. With the political terror then raging, the Hyndman group knew that discussion in public would effectively muzzle the majority of the delegates, for whom speaking their minds would have meant immediate prosecution.

them Connolly who, badly wounded, was propped up in a chair and shot, and thousands of prisoners were taken to English gaols.

In the spring of 1917, following the Government's decision to extend dilution to private work and to withdraw the trade card scheme (which gave exemption from military service to skilled men who volunteered for munitions work), unrest was wide and deep among the engineers. It burst into active revolt first at Rochdale, where, in defiance of the Act, a firm put women on grinding cotton spindles and sacked the men who refused to instruct them. Four hundred trade unionists struck, demanding the prosecution of the firm. The Government delayed, and by the beginning of May, 60,000 workers were on strike in Lancashire, and a powerful movement of solidarity, with the new national shop stewards' movement at its head, was sweeping the industry. Ten thousand came out at Sheffield, 30,000 at Coventry and the strike became general in London. This time the only major centres where engineers stayed at work were the Clyde and the Tyne. A national meeting of shop stewards was held at Derby—an event which itself speaks volumes for the growing cohesion of the new movement.

Dr. Addison, at that time Minister of Munitions, refused to negotiate with the strikers. Eight leading shop stewards were arrested and warrants were issued for two more. Terrified of the explosion of rank-and-file wrath which they knew this would cause, the A.S.E. leadership, which had so far stood aloof, arranged a meeting of Addison and the strikers. On a promise of no victimisation and of the continuance of negotiations, the men agreed to return to work.

It might seem at first that they had gained little, but really important consequences followed from the strike: the Government had been given an object lesson, and it was now more amenable. The charges against the eight leaders were withdrawn. The extension of dilution to private work was, after some delay, quietly dropped. By the autumn, the much-hated leaving certificate was abandoned. Wage concessions were granted, and it became an offence to victimise trade unionists after a strike. Stringent provisions were made for the restoration of pre-war rights and customs. "In short, the Government which started 1917 with the aim of gaining further concessions from the engineers found that as a result of the mass movement,

it had itself been forced to give ground." (Jefferys, *op. cit.*, p. 185.)

The shop stewards had shown themselves to be a real power in the engineering industry, and as an outcome of this struggle, a National Administrative Council of Shop Stewards was formed. Their recognition by the employers was extracted following a short determined strike of 50,000 workers at Coventry in the autumn.

Merging with this great industrial upsurge came the new currents released by the overthrow of Tsarism in Russia by the March, 1917, Revolution. The Russian workers and soldiers, organised in their Soviets, responding ever more unitedly to the leadership of the Bolsheviks, were blazing a trail out of the despair and suffering of the war, and their example had a profound and inspiring effect upon the working class of the whole world.

For these developments, the British working class was better prepared than it had been for the sudden test of 1914. For the first time since 1901, a Marxist party was represented at the Labour Party's annual conference in January, 1917. On behalf of the B.S.P., Fairchild moved a resolution declaring the imperialist character of the war and demanding, in the interests of the working class, immediate peace negotiations. The resolution was rejected by 1,697,000 to 302,000, and a slightly larger majority—1,849,000 to 307,000—defeated his reference back of the executive committee's report on participation of the Labour Party in the wartime Coalition Government. But the majority was only two to one (1,498,000 to 696,000) against a composite B.S.P., I.L.P. and Labourers' resolution warning that the capitalists at the end of the war would proceed to a programme of annexations and economic exploitation, and demanding that the International Socialist Bureau be called together.

In fact, the block votes cast by the unions concealed a bigger swing of working-class opinion than these figures would suggest. The engineers' delegation was equally divided on the reference back of the executive committee's report—so, by the chairman's decision, all their 340,000 votes went in favour of the executive. The general workers, with over 100,000 votes, were divided 11-6 on this question and 8-5, the rest abstaining, on the peace resolution. In the miners' delegation, support for the executive on the question of the International was secured by only a

small majority—330,000 to 270,000. (*The Call and The Labour Leader*, February 1st, 1917.)

In February, 1917, a member of the B.S.P. and secretary of the local boot and shoemakers, Albert Taylor, stood as "Socialist and Peace" candidate in a by-election in Rossendale, against a Government man. B.S.P., I.L.P. and other speakers took part in the campaign, and Taylor secured 1,084 votes against 6,019: a result in its implications bearing out the lesson of the Labour Party Conference.

In March, on the very eve of the Russian Revolution, the B.S.P. drew up a declaration to be made at an Allied socialist conference, which was to have been held in Paris. The conference was never held: but the B.S.P. published its declaration, signed by Fairchild and Inkipin. The declaration (1) denounced the war as imperialist, aiming on the Allied side "to establish over Europe the hegemony of the capitalism of the Entente Powers"; (2) demanded the withdrawal of Labour and Socialist Parties from governments in which they were participating; (3) insisted on an end of the "truce of classes" and reminded the working-class parties of the Stuttgart resolution binding them to take action in war conditions which would "bring about the downfall of capitalism"; (4) urged a campaign to demand peace by negotiation, without annexations, to be promoted by an immediate meeting of all bodies affiliated to the International.

This document appeared in *The Call* the very week that the Russian Revolution hurled the Tsar from his throne.

#### 4. *The Russian Revolution*

All over Britain, the Revolution gave new hope and confidence to the militants. On the Clyde, where severe blows had disorganised the movement in the previous year, the February Revolution "was one of the most potent factors in the revival" which now came about, says Gallacher (*op. cit.*, p. 137).

"'Free Russia' was emblazoned on our banners and mighty demonstrations in support of the revolution were organised all over Scotland. . . . Here we were in the early months of 1917 with the great masses of Glasgow aroused to the highest pitch of enthusiasm. 'Release McLean', 'Long Live Free Russia', 'Down with war—Down with the Warmakers'. How it is possible to

describe now those hectic days and the never-ending stream of activity that was carried on?"

The narrow sectarianism of the S.L.P., which had re-asserted itself and inhibited action since 1916, began to be broken down. After the return of the deportees and the winning by mass pressure of the release of McLean, came the re-establishment of the Clyde Workers' Committee, with Gallacher once more as chairman. Meanwhile, the Women's Peace Crusade, headed by Helen Crawford, a former suffragette, brought new power to the fight against war. Shop stewards, four deep, effectively protected a giant peace demonstration from jingo hooligans. Emanuel Shinwell, chairman of Glasgow Trades Council, expressed the fighting spirit of the time when he declared of the warmakers: "They're squirming now, but before we've finished with them, we'll make their teeth rattle."

The new spirit was abroad all over the country. A sign of the times was the calling by the United Socialist Council (which had been revived by the B.S.P. and the I.L.P.) of a conference at Leeds "to congratulate and encourage our Russian comrades", "to ascertain and pronounce upon the opinions of the working class of this country regarding the developments which have taken and are taking place in Russia", and to give a sympathetic response to the Russian people's steps for peace by undertaking "to work for a complete and real international peace based upon working-class solidarity". (*The Call*, May 24th, 1917.)

The 1,150 delegates represented 209 trades councils, 371 trade union branches, 294 Independent Labour Party branches, eighty-six B.S.P. branches and 184 women's and co-operative organisations. Gallacher, who attended on behalf of the Clyde Workers' Committee, was widely applauded for his call for revolutionary struggle against the war. Albert Inkpin was elected secretary of the Council elected by the conference, and four members out of thirteen were members of the B.S.P. But the pacifists and I.L.P. members, swept along by the demagoguery of MacDonald and Snowden, retained control both of the conference and the council, and the movement for establishing workers' and soldiers' councils had no practical results.

But mass pressure and the changing situation were now

infusing new life into the Labour Party and causing sharp conflicts in the leadership. When Arthur Henderson, one of the Labour Cabinet Ministers, was sent, along with other representatives of the Second International, to try to keep the Russians in the war, he returned convinced rather of the necessity to hold a conference of the International, including the Germans, at Stockholm, a proposal supported by the Petrograd Soviet, which in fact meant peace talks among the working-class parties of all the belligerent countries.

The proposal was adopted by a huge majority at the Labour Party Conference, but Henderson was removed from the Cabinet and the jingoes among the trade union leaders, notably Will Thorne (Gas Workers) and Havelock Wilson (Sailors and Firemen) unleashed a frenzied campaign which, though it failed to reverse the conference decision, sharply reduced the majority. This was the signal for the Government to refuse passports to Stockholm, and Henderson and his friends had to content themselves with an inter-allied conference early next year, when a statement of war aims was produced.

Meanwhile, the B.S.P. was coming more and more decisively to support the Bolsheviks in their struggle against the wreckers and betrayers of the Russian Revolution—the Mensheviks and Social-Revolutionaries, who were warmly encouraged by the I.L.P. and Labour Party leaders for their policy of coalition with the Russian capitalist parties.

As early as July 26th, a leading article in *The Call* condemned that coalition, and said that the opportunists were “undermining” the work of revolution. On October 4th, commenting on the counter-revolutionary rebellion by the Tsarist general, Kornilov, *The Call* declared:

“The Soviet must take power. This opinion has grown considerably in Russia. . . . We hope that the Democratic Conference will decide on this course. It is the only way to save the revolution.”

On October 18th, after the Democratic Conference had proved a fiasco, *The Call* stated that the Petrograd Soviet (now with a Bolshevik majority) “was right in refusing to enter into any coalition with the bourgeois parties”, and that the All-Russian Congress of Soviets arranged for November 7th would call into existence “a true revolutionary authority”.

Thus, just as the B.S.P. had been the only working-class party in Western Europe in which the internationalists had rallied the majority of the membership in mid-war to throw out the jingoes, so it was in 1917 the only Social Democratic party in the West to back the Bolsheviks against the opportunists before the November Revolution. After the Revolution, it took a clear and uncompromising attitude in favour of the Soviet Government. *The Call* leading article on November 29th declared:

"Socialists—genuine and not make-believe Socialists—have seized the reins of power. . . . For the first time we have the dictatorship of the proletariat established under our eyes. . . . The Bolshevik success has been carried out with the sympathy and support of the town workers and the common soldiers. . . . Peace and bread, the suppression of the war-profitier and the greedy landlord—this is what Lenin and his friends are trying to obtain for their own countrymen and for the distressed world at large. Are we going to help them?"

The paper printed message after message of greetings to the Russian workers, and in mid-January, 1918, the executive committee unanimously adopted a resolution congratulating Russian Social-Democracy "upon the epoch-making proletarian revolution achieved during the first days of November . . . a great advance towards the complete abolition of landlordism and capitalism"; and calling on the Labour Movement to compel the British Government "to give immediate recognition to the present Government of Russia".

At the Labour Party conference at Nottingham in the same month, delegates acclaimed with enthusiasm an address by Maxim Litvinov, the official representative of the Soviet Government. The B.S.P. moved a resolution congratulating the Russian people on the success of the November Revolution and calling on the British Government to join in the Brest-Litovsk peace negotiations which had begun. But with the support of Ramsay MacDonald and the consent of the I.L.P. delegates, Arthur Henderson moved another resolution supporting Allied war aims, and the chairman, after denying, amid great uproar, the B.S.P. delegate the right to speak, declared the official resolution carried. These manœuvres were, however, very far from voicing the opinions of the workers.

The news of the revolution gave fresh impetus to the expanding popular movement. "It sent a thrill of excitement through

every revolutionary worker", writes Harry Pollitt, looking back on his experiences as a young boilermaker about to embark on a historic campaign on Thames-side. "The knowledge that workers like me and all those around me had won power, had defeated the boss class, kept me in a growing state of enthusiasm." (Pollitt, *Serving My Time*, pp. 91-2.)

In Glasgow, the news had a tumultuous reception. "While all the Labour leaders, including Lansbury, remained absolutely silent about this world-shaking event, the Clyde workers received the news with a wild shout of joy. . . . The call for an immediate peace with no annexations and no indemnities, the publication of the secret treaties, these were hailed with raptures of delight throughout the whole area. Huge meetings, night after night, rose to extraordinary heights of enthusiasm in support of the Bolshevik Revolution", writes Gallacher. (*op. cit.*, pp. 174-5.)

And this enthusiasm took practical shape, as both recall. With other militant workers, Pollitt formed the River Thames Shop Stewards' Movement, and soon its membership card was "proudly displayed from Chiswick to Tilbury, and we formed the shipyard committees on which were represented the shop stewards of each trade". A paper was launched, called *The Consolidator*. On the Clyde, a meeting of trade union officials on January 14th unanimously passed a resolution asking the Government "to call an international conference to discuss peace terms at once", and by a large majority coupled this with the intimation that, unless the Government withdrew its Manpower Bill (popularly known as the "Manslaughter Bill"), before the end of the month, "we will advise our fellow workers on the Clyde to down tools".

Working-class hostility to the Bill was now gaining in strength and coherence: the Shop Stewards' N.A.C. decided at a meeting in Manchester in March to call a national strike against it. The German spring offensive and the cry of national danger, however, divided the workers before action could be taken.

But the lull did not last long, and in the summer and autumn before the Armistice, the struggle reached unprecedented scope and intensity, and profound unrest affected not only industry but also the police and armed forces: in the Army and Navy acts of insubordination and mutiny had been growing in



frequency, and the sailors set up ship's committees and port committees. In August the police came out on strike, gaining some concessions. Widespread strikes in Coventry and Birmingham engineering shops in July defeated the Government's instructions to certain firms limiting their employment of skilled men to a proportion of the total workmen. Next month—at the same time as the police—transport workers were striking for equal pay for women on men's work. In September cotton spinners were out, and a railwaymen's strike led by a militant rank-and-file organisation particularly affected South Wales. As the last shots of the war were fired, the number of strikes in engineering, shipbuilding and mining was a record for the war years.

## CHAPTER X

### THE POST-WAR CRISIS

#### 1. *Britain after the War*

THE labour movement emerged from the war with a power and magnitude the like of which had not been seen since the high days of Chartism. Awakened and toughened by long years of bitter experience on the battle-fronts and in the vast and growing industrial conflicts outlined in the previous chapter, the workers were gripped by a deep determination to end the misery, want and exploitation they had endured, to realise at last the dream of a new world of brotherhood, peace and plenty which was to be theirs after the "war to end war".

Revolt against the sufferings of the past joined with hope for the future to inspire a tremendous period of new ideas and growth and development of policy and organisation. For not only had the working class been changed by its own experience: it was now in a world in which all humanity was on the march: the Russian workers had broken through the front of imperialism to establish the first socialist state; the labour movements of all the capitalist countries were pressing forward with new power and resolution; and the peoples of the colonial countries, struggling for national liberation, had appeared as a decisive force on the stage of history.

Capitalism had entered upon the period of general crisis: there were to be only temporary phases of partial stabilisation in an epoch of economic, social and political convulsion out of which a new world was emerging. The position of British capitalism was profoundly altered by the flooding tide of change which swept forward as the forces which had been maturing over half a century reached full growth. The menacing German economic rival had indeed been eliminated temporarily, but a new and more powerful competitor, the United States, was superseding Britain as the richest and most powerful state in the capitalist world: she was the greatest creditor nation, and

Britain, which had formerly held that position, was now a debtor. The colonies, exploitation of which had averted Britain's economic collapse at the end of the nineteenth century, were themselves developing capitalist production and striving for independence. With declining manpower in her basic industries, some of which had seen little or no technical advance for decades, Britain entered the jungle of post-war economic competition in a world bursting with productive power yet whose goods the people were too impoverished to consume: after a brief and hectic "replacement" boom came the worst slump in history. There were never to be less than about a million unemployed before war broke out again in 1939.

At the same time, the history of the post-war crisis and of subsequent developments in Britain is not to be properly understood without a realisation of the tremendous reserves of economic strength and capacity for manœuvre still retained by the capitalists and their politicians. In the long run, their position had been irreparably damaged by the war and its consequences; but for the time being the position of the finance capitalists and the big trusts was in some respects greatly strengthened, as we have already noted. And the consolidation of big capital is also to be seen in the formation of the Federation of British Industries and the National Confederation of Employers' Organisations, the latter dealing specifically with labour questions. The war years, too, saw the closer integration of this formidable mass of economic power with the state machine, armed during the war with emergency powers which it was soon to renew in view of the popular upsurge. And, as we have noted on the authority of the Webbs, one arm of this state power was none other than the trade union bureaucracy. Here indeed was a formidable alliance, dominated by the "hard-faced men" who had done well out of the war and were still enriching themselves vastly out of the huge profits and bonus share issues of the post-war boom.

Confronting this alliance with growing consciousness and determination was a Labour movement mightier than ever before in history and growing at a pace more rapid than had yet been known. The membership of unions affiliated to the T.U.C. grew from 2,250,000 in 1914 to 4,500,000 in 1918 and then to 6,500,000 in 1920, when total trade union membership (including those outside the T.U.C.) reached a peak of over

8 million. Such vast forces in militant mood could not be confined merely to questions of wages and hours, even though these questions were their main immediate concern.

Two mighty antagonists now stood face to face, and victory or defeat in the major industrial struggles which marked this period were full of implications not only for the economic but for the political future of the nation. The labour movement in Britain had now really reached the stage when the fight for concessions, or to protect the movement from attack, was visibly merging into the struggle for power.

Herein lay the real significance of the mighty struggles of the post-war years. They showed once more how the mass enthusiasm and will to victory of the workers failed to achieve final success because political confusion gave scope to muddled and even consciously treacherous leadership; because, in fact, of the absence of a revolutionary party with real authority among the masses. The post-war crisis, nevertheless, was rich in achievement, not least of which was the foundation of the Communist Party.

## *2. Industrial Struggles*

The year 1919 was a critical one indeed for the ruling class, whose position was saved only by the absence of a determined centralised leadership to co-ordinate the separate streams of turbulent popular revolt which poured forth from the dark night of war.

The police and troops, the normal instruments of control in times of unrest, were themselves profoundly affected by the spirit of the age. After the Armistice, the discontent in the armed forces became more widespread, particularly over the question of delay in demobilisation: in the prevailing atmosphere, the Government feared to release thousands of battle-hardened troops into civilian life; they feared too the aggravation of the unemployment problem which already loomed amid the post-war dislocation, and, anxiously watching Soviet Russia, their thoughts were turning to intervention.

But the servicemen were determined to get out of uniform as quickly as possible. There had already been mutinies at the base camps in France, and the burning of the base at Etaples had borne striking witness to the mood of the troops in 1918. Now mutinies broke out at Folkestone, Dover, Brighton, Salisbury

Plain and Isleworth. Soldiers, sailors and airmen set up committees in camps and ships. On one occasion, thousands of troops commandeered lorries and streamed into London to voice their demands. The movement secured a rapid if disorderly demobilisation, and effectively prevented the use of conscript troops for intervention against Soviet Russia. But it was a blind, spontaneous movement, with little or no contact with the organised working class, many of whose active leaders, out of hatred of militarism, had preferred gaol to service.

Meanwhile, the strike wave reached new heights: 1919 was a peak year even for this turbulent period, in which the number of strikers and days lost in the five years from 1917 was more than twice in each case the figures recorded for the same period before the war, which included the Great Unrest.

The first major trial of strength after the war was on Clydeside, where the engineers and shipyard workers led by the Workers' Committee, the shop stewards and local union officials struck for a forty-hour week. Enthusiasm reached heights which were new even in the fierce struggles which the area had seen in the preceding decade. Mass demonstrations surged through the city, and the Red Flag was run up on the municipal flagstaff.

The authorities feared a rising, and could not rely upon the war-weary veteran troops stationed in the area, whom they confined to barracks, later bringing in units of young recruits to make a show of force. Their fears were not without foundation, for in the "Battle of George Square", when a huge demonstration led by Gallacher, Kirkwood, James Maxton M.P. and Emanuel Shinwell was brutally attacked by the police, the workers fought back and gave at least as good as they got. But the strike was isolated by the union leaderships; support was forthcoming only in Belfast and Edinburgh.

The weakness, as Gallacher has since pointed out, lay in the militant trade unionists' contempt for "politics" and "failure to realise the need for continuous and consistent leadership embracing all phases of activity". In fact, he observes, in a phrase that goes to the heart of the matter: "We were carrying on a strike when we ought to have been making a revolution." (Gallacher, *op. cit.*, p. 221.)

Meanwhile, a new challenge on a wider front was being prepared by the million-strong Mineworkers' Federation. By a

majority of nearly six to one the miners declared in a ballot vote for strike action in support of a demand for a 30 per cent. wage increase, a six-hour working day and nationalisation of the mines with a measure of workers' control. With coal stocks exhausted and the miners in consultation with their allies in the Triple Alliance—the railwaymen and transport workers—the Government faced a first-class national crisis the implications of which extended far beyond conditions in and ownership of the mines, tremendous though those considerations were.

The Government replied with a promise and a threat—both of them empty: they promised to appoint a Royal Commission on the industry and to implement its recommendations; they threatened to use armed force to suppress the strike, a step which in the existing situation was beyond their power. The miners' leaders exerted every ounce of their influence and managed to persuade their members by a narrow majority to suspend the strike notices.

The Commission, presided over by Mr. Justice Sankey and including among its twelve members six nominated by the miners, produced a withering exposure of capitalism in the coalfields and recommended wage increases, a seven-hour day and public ownership of the industry with a measure of workers' control. These contents of the Commission's interim report, together with the renewal of the Government's assurances, resulted in the withdrawal of the strike notices. The crisis past, the Government calmly abandoned its pledge, covering its treachery in a smoke-screen of words which emerged from a "National Industrial Conference" to which it invited unions and employers' organisations. Well might the miners say, as one M.P. pointed out, "We have been deceived, betrayed, duped."

The movement had sustained an important defeat, but immediately the struggle opened on new fronts. In the summer, a big victory was gained by the 300,000 Lancashire cotton workers who struck for and won their demands for a 30 per cent. wage increase and a forty-eight hour week. The Police Union called its second strike, but the response was only partial: the strikers were dismissed and trade unionism was stamped out in the force, though major concessions in pay and conditions were won.

Then the Government attempted to extend its counter-offensive as the mood for "a big fight with the unions" spread

among its supporters. Negotiations over the railwaymen's demands for "standardisation", including an upward levelling of wages, were spun out through the mining crisis; concessions were made to the footplate men in the hope of keeping them out; then the ultimatum was sent, demanding cuts ranging from 1s. to 16s. a week. This was described as a "definitive" offer, of which no criticism was permitted.

The N.U.R. leaders at once called a strike, which was greeted by a storm of ruling-class vilification, the tone of which was set by Lloyd George's denunciation of it as an "Anarchist conspiracy". Troops were called out, and instructions sent to local authorities to enrol a "Citizen Guard". Nevertheless, a week later the victory went to the railwaymen: the proposed cuts were abandoned and existing rates were stabilised, the lowest grade securing an advance. They had won by overwhelming solidarity (the footplate men were not to be bribed); by the sympathy and support of the co-operative movement, which made strike pay and food immediately available, and of the other constituents of the Triple Alliance; and the magnificent aid of the Labour Research Department, which bombarded the position of the employers and the government with the hard damaging missiles of facts.

The workers had achieved an important victory in the struggle against the developing counter-offensive of the employers.

"It may seem surprising", observes Allen Hutt (*Post-War History of the Working Class*, p. 29), "that the railway strike was not the starting point for a big forward movement in industry. That it might have spread to other industries is conceded; it did not do so because Mr. Thomas and the railwaymen's leaders took pains to prevent any such eventuality, pointedly refraining from calling on the Triple Alliance for sympathetic strike action."

So far from being a starting point; however, this victory, owing to the weakness of the leadership, was the last major advance of a purely industrial nature in this immediate post-war period, though a number of important secondary gains were made. Notable among the latter were the wage increases won for the dockers after the devastating exposure of the dock employers before a Court of Inquiry, in which Ernest Bevin won the title of "the Dockers' K.C."

The frustration and dissipation of energy which the leadership now inflicted upon the movement are to be well seen in the case of the miners, who now once more came into the centre of the industrial scene. Blatantly tricked by the Government in the matter of the Sankey Report, they turned to the T.U.C. A special Congress launched a "Mines for the Nation" campaign to compel the Government to nationalise the mines, as promised. Another special T.U.C. in March, 1920, presented with the alternative of a general strike or "intensive political propaganda", decided overwhelmingly for the latter: in fact, nothing effective was done. The miners in the summer tendered strike notices (backed by an overwhelming ballot vote) and appealed to their associates in the Triple Alliance. But the leaders of the railway and transport unions, despite the feeling of their own rank and file, avoided sympathetic action, and sought instead to act as mediators. When the miners' strike had begun, a railwaymen's ballot showed a majority for sympathetic action: but it was now too late, and the miners ended their strike with a temporary agreement conceding a wage increase related to output, the datum line—the name by which the strike is usually known.

The failure of the miners to achieve real victory in this period brought into sharp focus the question of leadership and organisation in the trade union movement, a question which had become increasingly urgent with the vast expansion of membership, power and responsibility which had marked the previous dozen years. Changes in the structure of industry and consequently in the nature of the problems confronting trade unionism demanded a structure which conformed to industrial needs instead of a congeries of craft unions which had evolved from an earlier industrial epoch and the effectiveness of whose co-operation was constantly marred by petty jealousies. It also demanded a leadership which was something more than an annual blowing off of steam followed by the lobbying of M.Ps. by the Parliamentary Committee. This state of affairs was fifty years out of date, yet improvements were achieved only slowly and painfully. As we have seen, something was done in the period of the Great Unrest, when the propaganda of industrial unionism made some headway. The growth and activity of the movement during and after the war speeded up the process. The war years saw the ratification of the Triple



Alliance and the establishment of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation.

In the post-war years, springing from a decade of endeavour by militant members, came a crop of amalgamations and reorganisations which materially changed the structure of British trade unionism.

Among the most important of these changes, and strikingly illustrative of the way in which the logic of events and the pressure of the forward-looking rank and file prevailed, though by no means completely, over the snags and tangles arising from the touchy but short-sighted pride of craft unions set in their ways for generations, was the formation of the Amalgamated Engineering Union in 1920.

During the war, protracted negotiations at executive level between the A.S.E. and a number of smaller unions concerned, resulted in no advance. But in the districts, where the advantages of unity were constantly stressed by the daily experience of local officials and shop stewards, significant developments took place. Amalgamation committees, established in a number of centres before the war, formed a National Committee to carry on the agitation, which in 1917 fused with the National Shop Stewards' Movement.

It was not, however, until three years later that the A.E.U. was formed by the amalgamation of the A.S.E. and six craft unions. The new organisation had nearly half a million members, and for its general secretary, Tom Mann, veteran of a hundred battles since the revival of the 'eighties. But even so it did not satisfy the real need for amalgamation and reorganisation: the powerful societies of boilermakers, foundry workers, patternmakers and electricians remained outside its scope. A big advance had been made, but the process was incomplete.

The amalgamations resulting in the two gigantic general labour unions also came about in these years. The Transport and General Workers' Union was formed in 1921 of unions of dockers and transport workers which originated in the upsurge of the unskilled in the 'eighties and 'nineties and which had been loosely grouped in the Transport Workers' Federation in 1910. After its absorption of the Workers' Union it became the largest single union. But there were two sides to this development: on the one hand, the consolidation, the movement towards mass industrial unionism was part of the long tradition

of militant struggle which characterised these organisations from the days of their foundation by the socialist pioneers; on the other, while they gained in stability, their fighting spirit was smothered and frustrated in a constitution which put real power in the hands of the bureaucracy. As Hutt says: "An ingenious structure—combining a high degree of centralisation with a double division of its members, vertically by industrial groups and horizontally by areas—enabled this powerful body to be substantially dominated by its forceful general secretary, Mr. Ernest Bevin." The other new-born giant, the National Union of General and Municipal Workers, which also owed its origin to the heroic days of the eighties and resulted from the fusion of a number of general labour organisations, was also to become a stronghold of the right-wing bureaucracy. "Between the two of them, the T.G.W.U. and the N.U.G.M.W. with their vast card votes, were more and more to dominate the main decisions of the movement, alike at the T.U.C. and at Labour Party conferences." (Hutt, *British Trade Unionism*, p. 91.)

This period saw important steps towards consolidation in many industries, though as in the case of the engineers they were not always carried through to their logical conclusion. In the building trade, the Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers was formed of the old organisations of Bricklayers and Stonemasons, while the two unions of Carpenters and Joiners merged to form the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers, and some degree of co-ordination with other unions in the industry was achieved in the National Federation of Building Trades Operatives, which had been founded in 1918.

### 3. "*Hands Off Russia*": the Councils of Action

But this was not only a time of industrial conflicts and far-reaching internal reorganisation: the British working class now stepped forth in its might to join with the awakened workers of many lands to change the course of world history. The victorious Revolution in Russia in November, 1917, had as we have seen at once inspired joy and enthusiasm among the workers. And though this feeling of triumph and sympathy was clearest among the politically conscious, it was deep and strong among the mass of the workers: neither the propaganda the ruling class poured out in its anger, fear and rage nor the despairing cries of the right-wing Labour leaders could alter or divert it.

From the moment it became known in 1918 that British forces were involved in fighting against the Revolution, the indignation of the workers rose and the will for drastic action grew among them. Conditions were maturing for a decisive frontal conflict with the ruling class, who, as they planned further intervention to smash the Revolution, hastily grasped at new devices of repression at home in the Emergency Powers Act (October, 1919).

In the spring of 1919, the Miners' Federation took advantage of a special conference of the political and industrial sides of the movement to carry a resolution demanding the end of intervention against Soviet Russia. The Labour Party Conference in June discussed direct action to stop the war of intervention—to the alarm and indignation of the leadership, who were bluntly told by Bob Smillie, the miners' leader: "It was rather strange that the executive committee of the Labour Party should have taken up exactly the position of every exploiter and politician in this country at the present time. They feared more than anything else what had come to be called direct action." And Herbert Morrison declared:

"They had got to realise that the present war against Russia on the part of this country, France and the other imperialist powers, was not a war against Bolshevism or against Lenin, but against the international organisation of Socialism. It was a war against the organisation of the trade union movement itself, and as such should be resisted with the full political and industrial power of the whole trade union movement." (Quoted Allen Hutt, *Post-War History of the British Working Class*, 1937, pp. 34-5.)

The conference carried by a two to one majority a resolution demanding the immediate end of intervention and calling for co-operation of the political and industrial sides of the movement for action "to enforce these demands by unreserved use of their political and industrial power". Huge demonstrations were held throughout the country in July and August, and Glasgow Trades Council, right on the crest of the wave of popular feeling, proposed a twenty-four-hour general strike.

In the summer of 1919, a National "Hands Off Russia" Committee, with its headquarters at Manchester and with A. A. Purcell, a member of the T.U.C. Parliamentary Committee, as president, was formed to fight for the ending of

intervention. By the end of the year it included both well-known revolutionary figures like Tom Mann (general secretary of the Engineers), A. A. Gossip (general secretary of the Furnishing Trades) and William Gallacher, and very different men like C. T. Cramp (industrial secretary of the N.U.R.), John Bromley (general secretary of the Locomen) and William Straker (secretary of the Northumberland Miners). The secretary was W. P. Coates, B.S.P. organiser lent for the purpose.

Tension reached a new peak in the following spring, when the Poles, with British and French assistance, invaded the Russian Soviet Republic. Now the hope, sympathy and enthusiasm which the Revolution had inspired in the hearts of the British workers centred on one vital, practical task—the stopping of arms ships for Poland. This was a historic hour for the Thames river workers, among whom the militants of the British Socialist Party, the East London Workers' Socialist Federation and the Thames Shop Stewards' Movement (led by Harry Pollitt), had been conducting ceaseless agitation.

On May 10th, just as the ruling class was rejoicing in the Polish capture of Kiev, the dockers refused to load and the coal-heavers to coal the munitions ship *Jolly George*. Five days later, the munitions were unloaded back on to the dockside. One case bore a familiar sticky-back—"Hands off Russia". "It was only small", writes Pollitt (*op. cit.*, p. 116), "but that day it was big enough to be read all over the world."

This triumph inspired the movement to even greater efforts. The Dockers' Union put a general ban on the loading of munitions for Poland. The Labour Party conference demanded peace with Russia, and though a B.S.P. addendum to this resolution calling for a general strike to stop intervention was defeated, the movement was now so thoroughly roused that this in fact was the policy pursued.

The hour of the decisive trial of strength on intervention arrived in August. Goaded by a desperate fear of the consequences of a brilliant Red Army counter-offensive in Poland, coming as it did when all Europe was in a state of revolutionary upheaval, the British Government threatened war on the Soviet Republic. The threat was met, as the Labour Party executive reported later, by "one of the most striking examples of Labour unanimity, determination and enthusiasm in the history of the movement."

In response to telegrams from Labour Party headquarters on August 5th, Labour Parties and trades councils throughout the country held during the week-end hundreds of mass demonstrations against war on Russia. Next day, the newly formed Communist Party sent telegrams to branches in all the chief industrial centres, urging them to put forward at all meetings the demand for a general strike in the event of war, and for the formation of a National Labour Council, with local committees, representing all sections of the movement, to organise action. This call, developed into a manifesto by the Communist Party's executive next day, was published in a special edition of the *Daily Herald* on Sunday, August 8th. Great demonstrations at Liverpool, Birmingham, Sheffield and many other cities during the week-end adopted these demands.

On the Monday, a joint meeting of the Parliamentary Committee of the T.U.C., the Labour Party executive and the Parliamentary Party unanimously decided to warn the Government that "the whole industrial power of the organised workers will be used to defeat this war", and a Council of Action was set up to implement this policy. These decisions were endorsed by a special National Conference of the Labour Movement four days later. The Conference pledged resistance to every form of armed intervention in Russia, and the Council of Action was mandated to remain in being until recognition of the Soviet Republic and the establishment of normal commercial relations had been achieved, and it was authorised to this end "to call for any and every form of withdrawal of labour" which might be required.

Three hundred and fifty local Councils of Action (based largely on the trades councils) were set up, covering every major city and town. The challenge to the infamous policy of the Government was backed by the united support of 6,500,000 trade unionists, conscious of their power and that they were treading a path which was very different from the petty routine of the bureaucrats and time-servers. As A. G. Cameron (Woodworkers'), chairman of the Labour Party Executive, declared:

"If the day should come when we do take this action, and if the powers that be endeavour to interfere too much, we may be compelled to do things that will cause them to abdicate, and to tell them that if they cannot run the country in a peaceful and humane manner without interfering with the lives of other

nations, to chance whether we cannot do something to take the country into our own hands for our own people." (Quoted, Hutt, *Post-War History*, p. 40.)

Preparations were made for action not only on a national but an international scale: telegrams were sent to the workers of France and Italy inviting them to join in the proposed strike.

The Government surrendered unconditionally. It advised the Polish Government to cease its military attacks against Russia and conclude peace.

Exerting its united, independent power in a way not known since Chartist times, the British working class had taken decisive action in a major question of national policy. Lenin commented:

"This Council of Action, independently of Parliament, presents an ultimatum to the Government in the name of the workers—it is the transition to the workers' dictatorship. . . . The whole of the English bourgeois Press wrote that the Councils of Action were Soviets. And it was right. They were not called Soviets, but in fact they were such."

#### 4. *The Problem of Leadership*

The establishment by the workers of a machinery of political power capable of imposing their will on the ruling class in a historic issue combining the most vital elements of social, foreign and military policy dramatically symbolised the strength and stature the labour movement had now achieved. The working class was now like a giant waking from sleep: the mere movement of one limb could shake the whole state; guided by far-seeing policies and inspired by consciousness of its destiny, its power would be boundless.

The trend of general economic development, intensified with the growth of mass production from the last quarter of the nineteenth century onwards, had had the effect of unifying the working class, of wearing away or breaking down craft and industrial divisions. Vast recurring waves of economic struggle—notably the periods 1888-91, 1910-14 and 1917-20—showed the growth of class consciousness and militancy and had left an immense harvest in millions of new members, new unions and the organisation of backward areas and industries.

All these advances had been made possible by the daring and faith of left-wing rank and file leaders who spoke what

was in the hearts of the workers and kindled their fighting spirit. Similarly, in the political field, it was the enthusiasm and understanding of the socialist pioneers, and particularly the Marxists, combined with the vital need to defend the workers' basic rights of organisation and their standard of life, which had inspired the drive for independence of working-class political organisation and policy.

The time was now ripe for carrying forward that drive, to raise the movement from the stage of fighting for its interests within capitalist society to the stage of combining that fight with the conscious struggle to transform society. Vital decisions on organisation, policy and leadership lay before the organised working class; and there could be no doubt that the workers were in a mood for determined, united action.

The tragedy of these heroic post-war years was that though big advances were made in the movement's ideas and organisation, they were hampered, obstructed and diverted by policies arising from the narrow special interests of the upper strata of the workers or the trade union bureaucracy, or above all, by social and political ideas, easy and fair-seeming, but fundamentally disastrous.

The railway strike of 1919 showed with startling clarity how urgently central direction of the trade union movement was required, and the report and recommendations of a committee on the matter were received by a special meeting of the T.U.C. at the end of the year. The report pointed to the need for "a really effective central co-ordinating body for the Movement as a whole." Lack of co-ordination had repeatedly resulted "not only in the overlapping of administrative work, but also in unnecessary internal, and other disputes, involving vast financial and moral damage to the whole Labour Movement." The trade union movement must be given central direction, and the political, industrial and co-operative sides of the movement must be co-ordinated.

The solution of the trade union aspect of this problem was particularly urgent, as there was in fact no real national trade union leadership: the only permanent body was the Parliamentary Committee, whose job had been to lobby for support for Congress resolutions. It was replaced by the Trades Union General Council consisting of thirty-two members nominated by seventeen industrial groups and submitted to a

ballot of the whole Congress. Its purpose was to promote common action, but it had no power to enforce its decisions.

The newly-formed Communist Party criticised this arrangement as a "new alliance of old leaders", and proposed a Congress of Labour based not only on the unions but also on shop and works committees grouped round the trades councils, which would thus become the local agencies of a real national leadership.

The outcome of the attempt to co-ordinate the movement as a whole had similar limitations. The Labour Joint Board, on which the T.U.C. and the Labour Party had been represented, was superseded in 1921 by the National Joint Council (later named the National Council of Labour), on which the T.U.C. General Council, the Labour Party Executive and the Parliamentary Labour Party had equal representation. This body, however, was purely consultative and did not include the Co-operative Party, formed four years earlier.

The problem of organisation and the machinery of leadership had been recognised; the solutions were still mainly formal, meeting neither the needs of the time nor the desires of the bulk of the movement.

First in time among the political changes of the post-war epoch was the adoption of a socialist programme and a new constitution by the Labour Party. In 1918, it was declared that the aim of the Party was

"to secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible, on the basis of common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service."

Warning against "patchwork" in post-war reconstruction, the detailed programme, drafted by Sidney and Beatrice Webb, said that the Labour Party saw in recent events "the culmination and collapse of a distinctive industrial civilisation, which the workers will not seek to reconstruct." It continued:

"The individualist system of capitalist production . . . with the monstrous inequality of circumstances which it produces and the degradation and brutalisation, both moral and spiritual, resulting therefrom, may we hope, indeed have received a death-blow.



With it must go the political system and ideas in which it naturally found expression. We of the Labour Party, whether in opposition or in due time called upon to form an Administration, will certainly lend no hand to its revival. On the contrary, we shall do our utmost to see that it is buried with the millions whom it has done to death."

Such a scathing denunciation of capitalism was in tune with an ever-growing body of working-class and even middle-class opinion at this time. Liberal demagoguery was losing its hold as the basis of liberalism disappeared, and with a rapid expansion of its strength the Labour Party now displaced the Liberal Party as the alternative leading party of the state. Labour's poll, which had been a mere half million in 1910, rose to two and a quarter millions in 1918, four and a quarter millions in 1922, and five and a half millions in 1924, the year of the first Labour Government.

With this expansion went a tremendous growth of affiliated membership and of local organisation which was speeded up by the new constitution. Hitherto, individual members were admitted only through the Socialist Societies; now, with the establishment of constituency Labour Parties, direct individual membership of the party became possible. The pre-war total of 146 affiliated Trades Councils and Labour Parties grew to 389 in the first post-war year, and by 1920 there were over 2,000 divisional and local Labour Parties, covering practically every constituency.

Behind the ringing challenge of some passages of the new programme, however, lurked the old ideas of Fabianism and Liberal reformism. The programme repeatedly disavowed any suggestion that it made "class" proposals, and the Webbs claimed that the Party had been transformed "from a group representing merely the class interests of the manual workers into a fully constituted political party of national scope". The new constitution, they said, had led to "a considerable accession of membership, largely from the professional and middle classes." Subject to such influences, the I.L.P., hitherto the political mainstay of the Labour Party, was becoming "the refuge of all those men and women of influence, reputation and learning who had lost faith in the Liberal Party." (M. Beer, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 389.)

The Labour Party thus became an alliance of working-class

and lower middle-class elements—with the latter, represented not only by Liberals but by trade union M.Ps. who had become detached from the workers, in leading positions. Though verbal concessions were made to the aspirations of the workers for socialism, the policy and outlook of the Labour Party were substantially those of the old Liberal-Labour reformism.

The contradictions were especially marked in the I.L.P., which, as well as receiving an influx of disillusioned middle-class Liberals, was also recruiting from the politically awakened workers, whose attitude as we have seen, was very militant at this time. Thus, while the leaders denounced the Russian Revolution, the rank-and-file supported it and carried a proposal to disaffiliate from the Second International and to make approaches to the Communist International, founded in 1920 from the militant sections of the socialist movements of a number of countries.

Not least among the historic achievements of this vital period was the formation at last of a revolutionary socialist workers' party in Britain, the Communist Party. At last a beginning had been made: after protracted discussion and negotiations and the urgent intervention of Lenin, the disagreements of the socialist sects had been overcome and they were merged into a party.

Among the constituent bodies, the most important was the British Socialist Party, the evolution of which we have traced from the Social Democratic Federation of the 'eighties, the first Marxist political organisation in Britain. In four decades this trend had educated and given to the movement a number of outstanding leaders who had left their mark in some of the greatest achievements of its history; it had kept alive, though often in narrow and dogmatic form, the priceless heritage of Marxist thought.

Other left-wing groups were associated particularly with special localities or aspects of the movement. The Workers' Socialist Federation, founded by Sylvia Pankhurst who had realised that women's emancipation could not really be achieved without workers' emancipation, was confined to the East End of London, scene of some of the triumphs of the socialist revival. In South Wales there lived on the powerful tradition of the miners' syndicalist movement and the great industrial struggles in which it had been born and grown, partly embodied in a local organisation, the South Wales Socialist Society. The

Socialist Labour Party, centring mainly in Scotland but now with some following in the North of England, held the allegiance of many militants of the shop stewards' movement. And there were, as we have seen, many rank and file members of the I.L.P. whose views were very different from those of Ramsay MacDonald. Finally there were a number of left-wing intellectuals from the National Guilds movement, which was a version of the syndicalist idea.

Here then, were the elements out of which the Communist Party was to be built. They were welded into a party by the impact of world events: the tremendous development of the working-class movement in Britain, the inspiring example of the conquest of power in Russia, and the guidance of Lenin and the Communist International, itself growing into a mighty world movement (at its second congress in Moscow in July, 1920, delegates were present from sixty-six parties in thirty-five countries).

Discussions on unity began on the initiative of Theodore Rothstein after the General Election of 1918. Next March, the British Socialist Party, following a referendum, declared overwhelmingly for affiliation to the Communist International. A meeting of representatives of the B.S.P., S.L.P., S.W.S.S. and W.S.F. was held in June, 1919, at which it became clear that there was no disagreement on main principles of communism.

The road to unity seemed open.

But the process proved to be a long and difficult one, mainly because of differences of opinion, tenaciously held, on two principal points of fundamental policy: primarily the attitude of the prospective party towards affiliation to the Labour Party and, at a later stage, towards the question of parliamentary action. Basically they sprang from the same source: the contempt which militant socialists from the pioneering days of the 'eighties onwards felt for the time-serving trickery of bourgeois politics and particularly for those Labour and trade union leaders to whom it was the be-all and end-all of existence. This revulsion from parliamentarism sprang from the finest of motives, but, as we have seen repeatedly, it had the effect of cutting off the militant socialists from the day to day life of the movement, of making them unable to give a correct, fighting lead on every issue, and so of leaving the field clear for the right-wingers, who were thus able to seize the leading positions.

The B.S.P., the largest of the revolutionary groups, was alone in supporting both participation in parliamentary politics and affiliation to the Labour Party, of which it was itself an affiliated organisation at the time. The S.L.P., which had somewhat modified the simon-pure position of its early years, was in favour of participation in parliamentary politics (it had just put up three candidates in 1918), but against affiliation. The Workers' Socialist Federation was anti-parliamentarian as well, although in the first stages of the negotiations it did not make an issue of this question. These were the divisions which delayed the establishment of a united party.

The B.S.P. proposed that the question of affiliation to the Labour Party be settled by a referendum of the members of the united Communist Party to be held within three months of its formation. Representatives of the other three organisations agreed to this, but the S.L.P. executive subsequently rejected the proposal. At a further meeting, in January, 1920, the S.L.P. was no longer represented, but its three original delegates—Arthur McManus, Tom Bell and J. T. Murphy—agreed to continue the struggle within their party. Yet further concessions proved fruitless, and at Easter they held a conference at Nottingham of their sympathisers, after which they took part in the negotiations as the Communist Unity Group. Then the Workers' Socialist Federation broke away and at a tiny meeting in June tried to "jump the gun" by proclaiming themselves the "Communist Party"; but their organisation proved still-born.

Meanwhile, the other negotiators unanimously formed themselves into a Joint Provisional Committee for calling a Unity Convention, which would establish the Communist Party and take the main decisions as to its policy—including those on affiliation to the Labour Party and on parliamentary action.

In this long and arduous progress, they were supported by the opinions of Lenin.

"It is essential for a Communist Party", he wrote in a letter to Sylvia Pankhurst, "that it should be intimately and continuously associated with the mass of the workers, to take part in every strike, to answer all the questions which agitate the minds of the masses. This is above all necessary in a country like England, where so far (as indeed in all imperialist countries) the socialist movement and the labour movement in general have been

exclusively guided by cliques drawn from the aristocracy of labour, persons most of whom are utterly and hopelessly corrupted by reformism, whose minds are enslaved by imperialistic and bourgeois prejudices." (*Lenin on Britain*, p. 245.)

But Lenin refused to support her manoeuvres. "I consider the policy of Comrade Sylvia Pankhurst and of the Workers' Socialist Federation in refusing to collaborate in the amalgamation of the British Socialist Party, Socialist Labour Party and others into one Communist Party to be wrong. I personally am in favour of participation in Parliament and of adherence to the Labour Party on condition of free and independent Communist activity", he wrote to the Provisional Committee on July 8th. And when he found (to anticipate a little) after the Communist Party was formed, that such a sterling champion of the workers as Gallacher was holding aloof because of genuine revulsion against the Labour leaders, Lenin wrestled with him, in the discussions at the Second Congress of the Communist International, which had already begun in Moscow when the Unity Convention met.

Gallacher wrote of these talks much later:

"I was hard to convince. I had such disgust at the leaders of the Labour Party and their shameless servility that I wanted to keep clear of contamination. Gradually as the discussions went on, I began to see the weakness of my position. More and more, the clear, simple arguments and explanations of Lenin impressed themselves on my mind. . . . The more I talked with Lenin, the more I came to see what the Party of the workers means in the revolutionary struggle . . . a party of revolutionary workers with its roots in the factories and in the streets, winning the Trade Unions and Co-operatives with the correctness of its working-class policy, a party with no other interests but the interests of the working class and the peasant and petty-bourgeois allies of the working class, such a party, using every avenue of expression, could make an exceptionally valuable Parliamentary platform for arousing the great masses of the workers to energetic struggle against the capitalist enemy." (*Revolt on the Clyde*, p. 251.)

The British Communist Party was established at a conference held on July 31st and August 1st, 1920, of delegates from the British Socialist Party, the Communist Unity Group of the Socialist Labour Party and many smaller organisations. Outstanding among its members at this stage were such stalwarts of

the labour movement as Tom Bell, Albert Inkpin, T. A. Jackson, Arthur McManus, William Paul, Harry Pollitt, Bob Stewart, R. Palme Dutt, R. Page Arnot and Walter Holmes. In January of the following year, new forces joined up in the shape of the Communist Labour Party (composed mainly of supporters of the Scots Shop Stewards' and Miners' Reform Movements, among whom notable figures were William Gallacher, J. R. Campbell, J. V. Leckie and Alex Geddes), and after the Conference of the I.L.P. the following Easter, the left-wing of that party, with Emile Burns, Shapurji Saklatvala, Helen Crawford and Ernest Brown came over and the united Communist Party was formed.<sup>1</sup>

Based upon scientific socialism, with its membership drawn to a great extent from the storm-centres of the previous decade, such as the Clyde, South Wales and East London, and carrying on the traditions of British militancy and internationalism which it inherited from the Chartist, from Marx and Engels and from Morris and the other British socialist pioneers, the Communist Party stepped forward to take its place in the labour movement.

It is true that the party inherited the weaknesses as well as the strengths of the British revolutionary socialist tradition: its founders came from predominantly propagandist groups. Yet its very formation marked a tremendous advance in the effort they had been making to solve the central problem of working-class politics—the integration of the struggle for socialism with the daily life of the people.

At a new peak of vigour and massive strength, the British Labour Movement was entering upon a phase which saw the full development of the facts which we have seen evolving in the previous half century. Henceforth, capitalism was in general crisis and there could be only one final solution: working-class power and the establishment of socialism. Many difficulties lay ahead and many forgotten lessons had to be re-learned. But who, on looking back over nearly two centuries of heroic

<sup>1</sup> Supporting a manifesto to the I.L.P. Conference which appeared in *The Communist*, on March 26th, 1921, Emile Burns wrote of "The Issue before the I.L.P." He referred to the unemployment and wages crisis then beginning and drew the conclusion that the "miners, railwaymen and several grades of workers are now reaping the product of the reformist tactics of the last seven years". He urged the rank-and-file of the I.L.P. to join in the revolutionary movement of the workers in every country on the basis of "the vital issues of the class struggle". The majority of the I.L.P. rejected the appeal, though a number of its members came over to the Communist Party.

struggle, patient loyalty and ever-renewed endeavour to seek out the true course for the advancement of the working people, can doubt the ultimate success of the British Labour Movement? The battle honours already inscribed upon its banners in 1920 gave promise of future triumph.

Dating back to the eighteenth-century trade clubs and the Corresponding Societies who defied bitter persecution in their fight to bring democracy to Britain, the British movement was the first in the world. The British workers were also first to form a mass party, the National Charter Association, fighting for political freedom and ultimate social emancipation. It was the British workers, too, who first formed co-operative societies and built co-operation into a national economic institution. Even in the period of apparent quiescence after the collapse of Chartism, the workers retained that deep loyalty to democracy, both national and international, which was the basis of the fight for liberty and democratic rights. They continued, too, to build and cherish their trade union organisations, which, despite limitations, were able to beat off determined efforts at destroying them.

Through the whole epic story runs a theme of struggle, of constant though at times slow and painful adaptation to new conditions. Thus, the ideals which had inspired Owen and the greatest of the Chartist thinkers burst forth once more in the glorious work of Morris and Hardie in the revival which was a prelude to the tremendous developments of the last phase in which the labour movement, now millions strong, declared its intention to advance to socialism.

How was such a movement thwarted? it may be asked. Part at least of the answer lies, as we have seen, in the divisions within the movement, and above all in the corrupting influence of imperialism, especially upon certain upper sections of the workers who, through their strategic position, exerted an influence out of all proportion to their numerical strength. Their desire for an acknowledged place in existing society led to a willingness to tolerate and even defend capitalism, to turn a blind eye to and even actively support the exploitation of colonial peoples. This corruption, and the division and weakening which it entailed, go far to explain the fact that the oldest labour movement in the world was not the first to build the new socialist society.

Of the many lessons which emerge from this history, one stands out above all others: to win socialism requires a leadership, a party, self-dedicated to that end and with full scientific understanding of it, and at the same time closely in contact with the people, leading their daily struggles, guiding the movement of the overwhelming majority of the working class with as many as possible of the middle class as allies.

Britain has her glorious roll of socialist thinkers and fighters; she has too a mighty and disciplined labour movement. But socialism is not achieved by either of these two in isolation—by the mass movement without the profound and conscious desire to build a new society, or by the idea of socialism which has not taken root in the everyday lives of the people. The union of the two is the indispensable precondition for the passionately-sought hope of generations: the victory of the working class and the common people over capitalism and the establishment of socialism in the land which gave birth to its idea.



## A NOTE ON SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

FROM the vast literature of the British Labour Movement, the following bibliography is intended merely to indicate some of the works to which reference has been made in the preparation of this volume and which are likely to be available to the reader who wishes to fill out in greater detail the broad lines of development we have attempted to draw.

### I. GENERAL

A broad view from a socialist standpoint of the national context within which the labour movement evolved will be found in A. L. Morton's *A People's History of England* (revised edition, 1948).

On the movement itself, Sidney and Beatrice Webb's *The History of Trade Unionism, 1666-1920* (revised edition, 1920), is, of course, one of the great classics and an invaluable source of information, though its Fabian-reformist interpretations are not accepted in the present volume. A shorter account from a Marxist standpoint is Allen Hutt's *British Trade Unionism* (revised edition, 1952).

A great deal of information on economic and social history is contained in *The Common People* by G. D. H. Cole and R. W. Postgate (1938), though it is of varying value in interpretation. Another mine of information which also needs caution is *A History of British Socialism*, by Max Beer (one volume edition, 1940).

Allen Hutt's *This Final Crisis* (1935), is a stimulating Marxist review of the movement's advance, and contains a valuable collection of quotations from the correspondence of Marx and Engels, all of which are not available elsewhere in English.

*Trials of British Freedom* (1940), by T. A. Jackson, gives a vivid account of some of the most important and exciting episodes in British working-class history.

A stimulating and informative collection of contemporary material covering most of the period dealt with in this book is

contained in three of the volumes of documents which form the *History in the Making* series (general editor, Dona Torr): *From Cobbett to the Chartists* (1948), by Max Morris; *Labour's Formative Years* (1948), by J. B. Jefferys; and *Labour's Turning Point* (1948), by E. J. Hobsbawm.

*Democracy and the Labour Movement* (1954), edited by John Saville, contains a number of valuable studies by Marxists of aspects of the labour movement.

Marx and Engels themselves studied and took part in the British labour movement over a period of about half a century: their works and correspondence give a deep insight into its development.

Volume I of *Capital* is itself a great storehouse of information on nineteenth-century England; and a useful and easily obtainable collection of their other writings on the subject is to be found in *Marx and Engels on Britain* (1953), which includes Engels' famous *Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, with its valuable retrospective preface to the 1892 edition. The *Marx-Engels Correspondence* (edited by Dona Torr, 1934; new edition, 1956) is also an essential source.

A continuation of this authoritative Marxist commentary is to be found in *Lenin on Britain* (1934), a collection of articles and excerpts from articles by Lenin, who was deeply interested in the British labour movement.

Another Marxist source, covering most of the period, is Theodore Rothstein's *From Chartism to Labourism* (1929).

There are numerous histories of the co-operative movement, of which *The Consumers' Co-operative Movement* (1921), by Sidney and Beatrice Webb, and *A Century of Co-operation* (1946), by G. D. H. Cole, are probably the most comprehensive.

Of trade union histories, the number is legion, but three may be mentioned because of their quality and comprehensive nature and the important part which workers in these industries played in the general movement: *The Story of the Engineers* (1945), by J. B. Jefferys; *The Miners: A History of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain 1889-1910* (1949), and *The Miners: Years of Struggle 1910-* (1953) by R. P. Arnot; and *The Builders* (no date), by R. W. Postgate.

## II. PERIODS

Turning now to books dealing with material used in specific

chapters, the student will find the following brief selection helpful and as a rule fairly easily available.

CHAPTER I: Copious material on the background of this period is contained in the three books by J. L. and B. Hammond: *The Village Labourer* (1913), *The Town Labourer* (1917) and *The Skilled Labourer* (1920). They are the product of great scholarship and passion; their main weakness lies in the tendency to present the working class only as victims rather than as a positive force as well. P. A. Brown, in *The French Revolution in English History* (1918), gives a fine picture of the development of early English Radicalism and of the impact of the events in France. H. N. Brailsford's *Shelley, Godwin and their Circle* (1913), deals with the theoretical side of this movement.

There is also a rich supply of available contemporary material. *The Selected Works of Tom Paine* (1948), edited by Howard Fast, includes the most famous of Paine's writings, many of which are also available in other forms. *The Opinions of William Cobbett* (1944), edited by G. D. H. and M. Cole, together with William Reitzel's *The Progress of a Ploughboy* (1933), an autobiography constructed out of Cobbett's own writings, really bring this grand radical fighter to life. First-hand material is also easily accessible in Samuel Bamford's *Passages in the Life of a Radical* (two vols., 1839, 1842), though it should be borne in mind that it is influenced by the fact that it was written as a self-vindication.

CHAPTER II: Max Morris's *From Cobbett to the Chartists*, already mentioned in the general section, is invaluable for this period. S. Maccoby's *English Radicalism, 1832-1852* (1938), gives a great deal of useful material; the main weakness of the book is that it draws no clear distinction between middle-class and working-class radicalism.

H. L. Beales, in *The Early English Socialists* (1933) and Richard K. P. Pankhurst in *William Thompson, 1775-1837* (1954), give a good introduction to the early English socialists round Owen, one of the best biographies of whom is G. D. H. Cole's *The Life of Robert Owen* (1930).

The most generally available standard works on the Chartist period are *The Chartist Movement* (1918), by Mark Hovell, and *The Bleak Age* (1934), by J. L. and B. Hammond, both from a

liberal-humanitarian standpoint: unfortunately Hovell died leaving his manuscript uncompleted and the final section written by T. F. Tout is less satisfactory. A useful political corrective is Salme A. Dutt's booklet *When England Arose* (1939).

Three books by people who were themselves prominent in the Chartist movement should be generally available and throw great light on the period, though it should be remembered that they were all written to justify their authors as much as to record events. These books are: *The Life and Struggles of William Lovett* (1876); *The Life of Thomas Cooper, Written by Himself* (1872); and R. G. Gammage's *History of the Chartist Movement* (1854).

*The Martyrs of Tolpuddle*, a centenary volume published by the Trades Union Congress in 1934, is full of information and interesting pictures of the participants in that memorable affair.

CHAPTER III: *Labour's Formative Years*, by J. B. Jefferys, the second volume in the *History in the Making* series, gives a vivid insight into this period.

S. Maccoby's *English Radicalism, 1853-1886* (1938), is a sequel to the volume by the same author mentioned above.

*Ernest Jones, Chartist* (1952), by John Saville, gives an excellent picture of the life and writings of Jones, particularly valuable for the light it throws on the neglected later period of Chartism.

A picture of the "Junta" and its activities in the sixties is included in *London Trades Council, 1860-1950, a History* (1950), which is closely based on the minutes of that organisation. George Howell, in *The Conflicts of Labour and Capital*, expounds the Junta's viewpoint.

*The Founding of the First International* (1939), is a useful collection of documents on the inception of the International Workingmen's Association. Dona Torr's *Marxism, Nationality and War*, Vol. II (1940), also deals with the wider, international aspects of this period.

CHAPTER IV: This chapter is an introduction to a new period and attempts to outline the salient features of monopoly capitalism and imperialism and their effect on the working-class movement. The definition of this phase is taken from Lenin's *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917).

Engels' 1892 Preface to *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, already mentioned, contains valuable generalisations on Britain and the working class in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

A vivid contemporary account of world capitalism in crisis is given in *Recent Economic Changes* (1890) by an American economist, D. A. Wells, while another bourgeois economist, J. A. Hobson, of whose work Lenin spoke highly, developed a penetrating criticism of capitalism and imperialism, notably in his books *The Evolution of Capitalism* (1898) and *Imperialism* (1938).

Recent Marxist work of great value includes M. H. Dobb's *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (1946), of which Chapter VII refers to the nineteenth century, and E. J. Hobsbawm's essay on "The Labour Aristocracy in 19th Century Britain" (in *Democracy and the Labour Movement*), in the course of which much material on the working class as a whole also emerges.

The first volume of Dona Torr's *Marxism, Nationality and War*, to which reference has already been made, deals with the period of imperialism.

**CHAPTER V:** This period is particularly rich in informed and penetrating observations by Engels: the best sources in English have been mentioned in the general section.

A thoroughly documented account of the period 1880 to 1900 from a Fabian standpoint is given by H. Pelling in *The Origins of the Labour Party* (1953), of which use has been made as a source of material for this and the following two chapters.

Much interesting and useful material on events and personalities of the early socialist movement is given in *Social Democracy in Britain* (1935), a history of the Social-Democratic Federation: its interpretation of events, however, is marred by that sectarianism which was the Federation's besetting sin.

It is to the period covered by this and subsequent chapters (1880-1900) that the collection of documents *Labour's Turning Point*, by E. J. Hobsbawm, already mentioned, is devoted: it is very valuable for further reading.

We have given some indication of the giant stature of William Morris in the history of British Socialism. E. P. Thompson's *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (1955), by its brilliant scholarship and deep sympathy frees Morris

from generations of misinterpretation, and also provides a great quantity of valuable material on the contemporary scene.

The best and most easily available selection of Morris' own work is *William Morris, Centenary Edition* (1934) edited by G. D. H. Cole.

Engels' articles in *The Labour Standard* in 1881, in which he raised the question of a working-class party, are reprinted in a pamphlet *The British Labour Movement* (1934).

Our account of the 1877 peace campaign is based upon a series of articles by Brian Pearce in *The Central European Observer* (July, August and September, 1951).

The period opening with the socialist revival and the beginning of the mass labour movement is rich in autobiographical material. This includes: Tom Mann's *Memoirs* (1923), and *From Single Tax to Socialism* (1913); Hyndman's *Record of an Adventurous Life* (1911); Ben Tillett's *Memories and Reflections* (1931); Will Thorne's *My Life's Battles* (1925); George Lansbury's *Looking Backwards and Forwards* (1935); and T. A. Jackson's *Solo Trumpet* (1953).

CHAPTERS VI, VII AND VIII: Most of the sources and recommended books for these chapters have been mentioned in the note for Chapter V or in the General Section.

In addition, Dona Torr's pamphlet on *Tom Mann*, a foretaste of a larger work in preparation, contains much useful material on the whole period.

Two articles in *The Marxist Quarterly*, by Allen Hutt on "The Hours of Labour" (January, 1955), and by W. S. Adams on "British Reactions to the 1905 Russian Revolution" (July, 1955), cast a fresh light respectively on the significance of the New Unionism and the stimulus which the growth of the revolutionary movement in Russia gave to the British working class.

CHAPTER IX: The origins and nature of the war of 1914-18 are dealt with in *The History of the C.P.S.U.* (1935), and in the first volume of *Marxism, Nationality and War*, to which reference has already been made.

Two autobiographical works, William Gallacher's *Revolt on the Clyde* (1936), and Harry Pollitt's *Serving My Time* (1940), vividly portray at first hand some of the struggles of the

growing movement of working-class militancy. Tom Bell's *Life of John McLean* (1943), is also valuable on this period.

A hostile and partial account of the growth of anti-war politics in the British Socialist Party is given by Lee and Archbold; this has been corrected and supplemented in the present volume from contemporary material.

The general histories mentioned earlier have also been used in this chapter; perhaps the most important of the trade union histories for this period—as it was an “engineers’ war”—is *The Story of the Engineers* by J. B. Jefferys.

CHAPTER X: Allen Hutt's *Post-War History of the Working Class* (1937), the early chapters of which give an exciting account as well as a penetrating analysis of the labour movement in the great crisis after 1918, is indispensable for further study of this period, as are the autobiographies of Pollitt and Gallacher, already mentioned.

# INDEX

- ABERDEEN**, 83  
 Abraham, William (Mabon), 211  
 Addison, Dr., 269  
 Agriculture, 9, 10, 40, 50, 60-2, 72-3, 131  
 Allen, H., 149  
 Allen, William, 105, 108  
 Amalgamated Association of Miners, 113, 186  
 Amalgamated Engineering Union, 48, 252, 284  
 Amalgamated Society of Carpenters, 114, 885  
 Amalgamated Society of Engineers, 105-8, 113, 124-5, 127, 147, 186, 209-10, 212, 252, 261, 269, 284  
 Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants, 194, 211, 213, 231  
 Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers, 285  
 Amalgamated Union of Building Trades Operatives, 285  
 American Revolution, 20-1  
 Arch, Joseph, 127, 160, 249  
 Arnold, 36  
 Arnot, R. Page, 297  
 Ashton, Samuel, 24  
 Ashton, Thomas, 207  
 Ashton-under-Lyne, 86, 42  
 Asquith, H. H., 207  
 Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen, 252  
 Association for Preserving Liberty and Property, 25  
 Atkinson, William, 229  
 Atwood, Thomas, 62, 77, 85  
 Aveling, Edward, 168, 175, 178, 181, 190, 199, 200  
  
**BALFOUR**, ARTHUR, 223  
 Ballot Act (1872), 120  
 Bamford, Samuel, 20, 40, 44  
 Barnard Castle, 219  
 Barnes, G. N., 214  
 Barrow, 266  
 Basle International Socialist Conference, 242, 255  
 Battersea, 198  
 Bax, E. Belfort, 167-8, 170  
 Binning, Thomas, 180  
 Birmingham, 15-16, 24, 44, 60, 70-1, 76-8, 80, 85-8, 118, 162, 176, 276, 288  
 Birmingham Political Union, 59, 77, 84  
 Beesley, Prof. E. S., 122  
 Beehive, 109, 115, 117, 123  
 Bell, Richard, 213, 218, 220  
 Bell, Tom, 295, 297  
 Benbow, William, 64, 88  
 Bermondsey, 249  
 Besant, Annie, 157, 175, 189  
 Bevin, Ernest, 282, 285  
 Blackburn, 93, 166  
*Black Dwarf*, 42  
 Blanketeers, 43  
 Blatchford, Robert, 198, 201, 203, 242  
 Boer War, 141, 165, 200, 212, 214, 220  
 Bolsheviks, 255, 270, 273-4  
 Bondfield, Margaret, 221  
 Bonnymuir, 45  
 Booth, Charles, 150  
 Bolton, 46  
 Bowman, Guy, 237-8  
 Brace, William, 210  
 Bradford, 84, 87, 197-9  
 Bradford Labour Union, 178, 198  
 Bradlaugh, Charles, 156-7  
 Brandreth, Jeremiah, 43-4  
 Braxfield, Lord, 25-6, 28  
 Bray, John Francis, 51, 54  
 Bright, John, 110-11, 121  
 Brighton, 279  
 Bristol, 10, 64, 67  
 British Socialist Party, 240-5, 257-8, 260, 266-8, 270-4, 287, 293-6  
 Broadhurst, Henry, 151, 153, 182, 196  
 Bromley, John, 287  
 Brown, Ernest, 297  
 Brunner, John, 151  
 Builders, 67, 69, 113  
 Building Workers' Industrial Union, 253  
 Bulgaria, 158  
 Burgess, Joseph, 198-9  
 Burke, Edmund, 21  
 Burnett, John, 153  
 Burns, Emile, 297  
 Burns, John, 153, 167, 174-5, 179-80, 182, 187, 189, 194, 197-9, 202, 208, 214-16  
 Burrows, Herbert, 189  
 Burt, Thomas, 124, 153, 182  
 Byron, Lord, 36, 42  
  
*Call*, 267-8, 271, 273-4  
 Calico Printers, 46  
 Cameron, A. G., 288  
 Campbell, J. R., 297  
 Campbell-Bannerman, Sir H., 222-3  
*Capital*, 169, 205  
 Cardiff, 206  
 Carlile, Richard, 42, 45



- Cartwright, Major, 13, 41-2  
 Castlereagh, Lord, 38-9  
 Cato Street plot, 43, 45  
 Central Labour College, 237  
 Central Withdrawal of Labour Committee, 261, 263  
 Chadwick, Edwin, 72  
 Chamberlain, Joseph, 141, 153, 156  
 Champion, H. H., 165, 174, 179, 182-3, 191  
 Chartism, 13, 17, 50, 57, 66, 74, 75-99, 103, 110, 112, 116, 120, 298  
 Chatham, Earl of, 12  
 Churchill, Winston, 246, 263  
 Civil Service Clerical Association, 250  
*Clarion*, 198, 202, 225, 228, 242  
 Cleave, John, 75, 81  
 Clitheroe, 219  
 Clydeside, 186, 218, 237, 260-5, 269, 275, 280, 297  
 Clyde Workers' Committee, 263, 265  
 Clynes, J. R., 229, 249  
 Coal, Colliers, 10, 18, 31, 40, 67, 83, 91, 101, 112-13, 125-6, 186, 193-4, 207, 211, 247-8  
 Coal Mines Act (1908), 224  
 Coates, W. P., 287  
 Cobbett, William, 29, 39, 41-2, 45, 56, 58, 62-4  
 Cobden, Richard, 110  
 Cole, G. D. H., 239  
 Collins, John, 86, 88  
 Colne Valley, 226, 228  
 Colonies, 9, 133-4, 141-2, 221, 254, 278  
 Combination Acts (1799, 1800), 19, 31, 33-5, 38, 46-8  
*Commonweal*, 173  
 Communist International, 293, 296  
 Communist Labour Party, 297  
*Communist Manifesto*, 117, 128, 177  
 Communist Party, 258, 288, 291, 293-7  
 Communist Unity Group, 295  
 Connolly, James, 248, 250-1, 268-9  
 Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act (1875), 123  
 Cook, A. J., 238  
 Co-operation, 54, 57, 68, 109-10  
 Co-operative Party, 291  
 Co-operative Wholesale Society, 109  
 Copenhagen International Socialist Conference, 242  
 Corn Laws, 40, 49, 80, 90, 95  
 Cotton, 10, 14, 31, 40, 101, 114, 152, 207  
 Coulson, Edwin, 108  
 Councils of Action, 288-9  
 Coventry, 269, 276  
 Cramp, C. T., 287  
 Crawford, Helen, 273, 297  
 Cremer, W. R., 108, 117, 120, 126  
 Crimean War, 110-12  
 Criminal Law Amendment Act (1871), 123-4, 127  
*Crisis*, 68-9  
 Crowsley, Fred, 248  
 Crooks, Will, 219, 221  
 Cunninghame-Graham, R. B., 160, 175, 183  
 Curragh mutiny, 253  
 Curran, Pete, 142, 198, 219, 226  
*Daily Herald*, 215, 226, 288  
 Davis, R., 147  
 Davitt, Michael, 157-8, 160  
 Defence of the Realm Act (1914), 226  
 Democratic Association, 115  
 Derby, 64, 68, 70, 218, 269  
 Dilke, Sir Charles, 156  
 Dockers' Union, 248-9, 287  
 Dock, Wharf, Riverside and General Workers' Union, 194, 206-7  
 Dod Street, 173-4  
 Doherty, John, 48, 67  
 Donald, A. K., 180  
 Douglas, R. K., 77  
 Dover, 279  
*Dream of John Ball*, 169  
 Dublin, 250, 268  
 Dunning, T. J., 124  
 Durham, 67, 107, 125, 186, 193, 207  
 Dutt, R. Palme, 297  
 EASTERN QUESTION ASSOCIATION, 159  
 Edinburgh, 25, 112, 166  
 Edwards, George, 249-50  
 Edwards, George (the Spy), 43, 45  
 Eldon, Lord, 38-9  
 Emergency Powers Act (1919), 286  
 Emigration, 99, 102  
 Employers and Workmen Act (1875), 123  
 Employers' Federation of Engineering Associations, 209  
 Engels, Frederick, 19, 50, 58, 99, 110, 116-17, 162-3, 172, 176-8, 194-8, 200, 297  
 Engineering, 118, 137-8, 144, 148-9, 194  
 FABIAN SOCIETY, 172-3, 181, 197, 199, 201, 204-5, 213, 216, 239-40, 244-5, 258  
 Fairchild, E. C., 267, 270-1  
 Featherstone, 207  
 Federation of British Industries, 278  
 Fielden, John, 73  
 Fineberg, J., 267  
 Folkestone, 279  
*Forward*, 265  
 Fraternal Democrats, 115-16  
 French Revolution, 16, 21-2, 29  
 Friendly Society of Ironfounders, 46  
 Friendly Societies, 110  
 Frost, John, 87-9

- GALLACHER, WILLIAM, 257, 260, 263-5, 271-2, 280, 287, 296-7  
 Gammage, Robert, 85  
 Garibaldi, 115  
 Garrard, William, 81  
 Gas Workers' and General Labourers' Union, 194-5, 198  
 Gasworkers' Union, 248-9  
 Gast, John, 42, 46, 48  
 Geddes, Alex, 297  
 General Council (of T.U.C.), 290-1  
 General Railway Workers' Union, 194  
 General Union of Carpenters and Joiners, 48  
 George III, 11-12, 24  
 George, Henry, 160-1, 182  
 Gerrald, Joseph, 26  
 Guild of St. Matthew, 161  
 Gladstone, W. E., 121, 126, 156, 183  
 Glasier, Bruce, 228, 267  
 Glasgow, 35-6, 40, 45, 70, 76-8, 83, 97, 112, 222, 247, 260, 264-5, 268, 271-2, 275  
 Glasgow Trades Council, 112, 272, 286  
 Godfrey, Will, 246  
 Godwin, William, 52-3  
 Gordon Riots, 13  
 Gorgon, 42, 46  
 Gosling, Harry, 246  
 Gossip, A. A., 287  
 Grand National Consolidated Trades Union, 69-71, 106  
 Grand National Union of the United Kingdom, 67  
 Gray, John, 51, 54  
 Grayson, Victor, 226, 228  
 Grey, Lord, 59, 61-2  
 Guild Socialism, 240  
 Guile, Daniel, 108
- HALIFAX, 93, 104-5, 109  
 Hammill, Fred, 187  
 Hampden Clubs, 41  
 "Hands off Russia" Committee, 286  
 Hardie, Kier, 155, 182-3, 188, 196, 198-200, 202, 205, 209, 211, 213, 215, 218-20, 222, 228, 245, 249, 255-6, 298  
 Hardy, Thomas, 23-4, 27-8  
 Harney, G. J., 78, 96-7, 115, 117, 192  
 Hartley, Edward, 243  
 Haynau, General, 111  
 Henderson, Arthur, 219, 255-6, 264, 266, 273  
 Henson, Gravner, 36, 38  
 Hepburn, Tommy, 67  
 Hetherington, Henry, 62, 75, 81  
 Hird, Dennis, 226  
 Hobson, J. A., 137, 212  
 Hodgskin, Thomas, 51, 54-5  
 Holmes, Walter, 297  
 Hone, William, 42
- Hornby v. Close*, 122  
 Howell, George, 108, 117, 120  
 Hume, Joseph, 47, 80  
 Hull, 109, 206  
 Hunt, Henry, 42, 44, 56  
 Hyde Park, 104, 119, 178, 195  
 Hyndman, H. M., 163-6, 168-71, 179, 196-7, 218, 229, 242-3, 257, 267-8
- INDEPENDENT LABOUR PARTY, 142, 199-205, 212-14, 216-19, 221, 225-8, 230, 235, 239, 243-5, 257-8, 260-1, 265-7, 270-4, 292-4, 297  
 India, 9, 111  
*Industrial Syndicalist*, 238, 248  
 Industrial Syndicalist Education League, 238  
 Industrial Workers of the World, 235  
 Inkpin, Albert, 258, 267, 271-2, 297  
 Inkpin, H. W., 257-8  
 International Socialist Bureau, 230, 233, 244, 256, 270  
 International Socialist Commission, 258  
 International Working Men's Association, 114-15, 116-19, 126, 188  
 Ipswich, 73, 81  
 Irish, the, 82-3, 96-7, 119, 157-8, 160, 174-6, 250-3  
 Irish Citizens' Army, 251, 268  
 Irish Land League, 160  
*Irish Worker*, 248, 268  
 Iron, 10, 14, 31, 40, 135  
 Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, 284  
 Irving, Dan, 245  
 Isleworth, 280
- JACKSON, T. A., 297  
 Jarrow, 226  
 Jebb, Dr. John, 14  
 Jones, Ernest, 81, 96-8, 103-4, 109, 111, 116  
 Jones, William, 88  
 Journeymen Steam Engine Makers' and Millwrights' Society, 105  
 Jowett, F. W., 233  
 Joynes, 166  
 Junta, 108-9, 113, 122-4  
*Justice*, 165-7, 179, 222, 225, 268
- KAHAN, ZELDA, 242  
 Kautsky, Karl, 236  
 Kennington, 71, 97  
 Kirkwood, David, 261, 265, 280  
 Knee, Fred, 225  
 Knight, Robert, 145-7, 205  
 Knox, W., 151  
 Kydd, Samuel, 97-8
- LABOUR ELECTORAL ASSOCIATION, 178-9, 182-3

- Labour Emancipation League, 161, 166-8  
*Labour Leader*, 202, 213, 222, 225  
 Labour Party, 217, 222-33, 235, 239, 243-5, 256, 258-9, 270, 285-8, 291-6  
 Labour Representation Committee, 213-22  
 Labour Research Department, 240, 282  
*Labour Standard*, 162-3, 176  
 Lanark, 91  
 Lancashire, 11, 16, 36, 43, 48, 67, 82, 84, 86, 92, 97, 105, 114, 118, 186, 201, 207, 269, 281  
 Lane, Joseph, 161, 167  
 Lansbury, George, 158, 168, 205, 221, 233, 240, 249, 251, 256, 275  
 Larkin, James, 250  
 Lawrence, Pethick, 249  
 Law and Liberty League, 176  
 Leckie, J. V., 297  
 Leeds, 15, 60, 62, 82, 206, 272  
 Leicester, 10, 18-19, 176, 243-4  
 Lenin, V. I., 131-2, 135, 137-8, 151, 164-5, 212, 218, 226, 230-6, 243, 254, 267, 289, 295-6  
 Levellers, 13  
*Link*, 189  
 Linnell, Alfred, 175  
 Litvinov, Maxim, 274  
 Liverpool, 19, 34, 112, 222, 246-7, 288  
 Llanelly, 247  
 Lloyd George, David, 153, 212, 223, 231, 262, 264-5, 282  
 London, 9, 10, 12-13, 23-4, 33, 40, 43-4, 46-7, 62, 64, 68, 71, 78, 97, 104, 113, 118-19, 127, 138-9, 141, 150, 167, 174-6, 189-92, 201, 206, 222, 244, 246-7, 265, 280, 287, 297  
 London Corresponding Society, 23-4, 27-8, 30-1  
 London County Council, 176, 181, 197  
 London Revolution Society, 14  
 London Society of Compositors, 147  
 London Trades Council, 108, 113-14, 118, 122-4, 167-9, 195, 205, 210, 221, 225  
 London Working Men's Association, 75, 77, 81, 85  
 Loveless, George, 70  
 Lovett, William, 62, 66, 75-6, 81, 84-5, 88  
 Lowe, Robert, 119  
 Luddites, 36-8  
 Lugard, Lord, 141
- MacDonald, James Ramsay, 204, 213, 216-17, 220, 227-8, 233, 243, 256, 272  
 Mackintosh, Sir James, 22  
 Mahon, John L., 168, 180-1, 183  
 Malthus, Rev. T., 73  
 Manchester, 15, 37, 43-4, 46-7, 60, 62, 73, 84, 92-3, 117, 176, 247, 275, 286  
 Mann, Tom, 155, 161, 167, 179-83, 187, 189, 191, 194, 197, 202, 208, 237-8, 241, 245-6, 248, 252, 284, 287  
 Margarot, Maurice, 26  
 Marx, Eleanor, 167-8, 175, 178, 181, 190-1, 210  
 Marx, Karl, 11, 15, 58, 99, 104, 114, 116-17, 126, 163, 167, 188, 297  
 Master and Servant Law, 121-2  
 Mawdsley, James, 146-7, 208  
 Maxton, James, 265, 280  
 May Day, 188-9, 195-6  
 McDouall, Dr. Peter, 81, 85, 89, 93, 97  
 McLean, John, 237, 242, 260-1, 265, 271-2  
 McManus, Arthur, 260, 265, 295, 297  
 Merthyr Tydfil, 212, 218  
*Merrie England*, 201, 203  
 Messer, J. M., 263, 265  
 Methodism, 12  
 Metropolitan Radical Federation, 175  
 Middlesbrough, 198  
 Mid-Lanark Election, 182-3  
 Midland Social-Democratic Association, 162  
 Miners' Federation of Great Britain, 193-4, 196, 207, 210, 211, 247, 253, 280, 283, 286  
 Miners' National Union, 112-13, 186  
*Miners' Next Step*, 238-9  
 M'Nish, James, 77  
 Money, Sir Leo Chiozza, 150  
 Morel, E. D., 266  
 Monmouth, 87, 211  
 Morley, Samuel, 121  
 Morrison, Herbert, 286  
 Morrison, James, 68  
 Morris, William, 155, 159, 166-75, 180-1, 205, 297-8  
 Mottershead, Thomas, 158  
 Muir, J. W., 261  
 Muir, Thomas, 25-6  
 Munitions of War Act (1915), 262-5  
 Murphy, J. T., 295  
 Murphy, William, 250
- NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS' UNION, 127  
 National Association for the Protection of Labour, 67  
 National Charter Association, 88-9, 93-4, 96, 103, 298
- MACARTHUR, MARY, 249  
 Macaulay, T. B., 91  
 Macdonald, Alexander, 112-13, 124-5  
 Macdonald, James, 161-2, 166-7, 169, 205, 215, 217, 221

- National Confederation of Employers' Associations, 278  
 National Council of Labour, 291  
 National Federation of Building Trades Operatives, 285  
 National Federation of Transport Unions, 245  
 National Federation of Women Workers, 249  
 National Insurance Act (1911), 232  
 National Reform League, 118-20  
 National Socialist Party, 268  
 National Typographical Union, 105  
 National Union of Agricultural Workers, 250  
 National Union of Gas Workers, 190  
 National Union of General and Municipal Workers, 285  
 National Union of Railwaymen, 237, 250, 252-3, 282  
 National Union of the Working Classes and Others (Rotundists), 58, 62-4, 66  
 Newcastle, 74, 83  
 Newcastle, Duke of, 36  
 New Lanark, 53  
 Newport, 87  
*News from Nowhere*, 169  
 Newton, William, 105  
 No Conscription Fellowship, 266  
 Noel, Rev. Conrad, 242  
 Nore mutiny, 31  
 Norfolk, 249  
*North Briton*, 12  
*Northern Star*, 55, 79, 82, 84, 88, 93-4, 103, 117  
 Northampton, 157  
 Northumberland, 67, 114, 125, 186, 193  
 Nottingham, 18, 24, 35-6, 41, 44, 64-5, 96, 295  
 Norwich, 16, 18-19, 96  
  
 OASTLER, RICHARD, 73, 95  
 O'Brien, Bronterre, 56-8, 78-9, 83, 88, 94  
 O'Brien, William, 175  
 O'Connor, Fergus, 73, 81-5, 88, 90, 93-7  
 Odger, George, 108, 117, 120, 126  
 Oliver (the Spy), 43  
 Orbell, Harry, 191  
 Osborne, W. V., 231  
 Owen, Robert, 51-4, 56, 58, 68-9, 71, 109, 298  
  
 PAINE, TOM, 22, 25, 41  
 Palmerston, Lord, 111  
 Pankhurst, Sylvia, 249, 293, 295-6  
 Paris Commune, 125  
 Parliament Act (1911), 232  
 Paul, William, 297  
 Pease, E. R., 213  
  
 Peel, Sir Robert, 27  
 Pentridge, 44  
*People's Paper*, 103, 111, 117  
 Peterloo, 30, 44-5  
 Philanthropic Hercules, 46  
 Pickard, Ben, 193  
 Pilling, Richard, 81, 92  
*Pioneer*, 68-9  
 Pitt, William, 21, 33, 38  
 Place, Francis, 47, 62, 64  
 Plebs League, 226, 237  
 Plimsoll Line, 241  
 Police Union, 281  
*Political Justice*, 52  
*Political Register*, 41-5, 51  
 Pollitt, Harry, 263, 275, 287, 297  
 Poor Law (1834), 63, 66, 71-4, 78, 82  
*Poor Man's Guardian*, 51, 56, 58-9, 63-4, 66, 69, 78-9  
 Potter, George, 109, 123-4  
 Potters' Union, 67, 71, 74, 105  
 Preston, 93, 103  
 Price, Dr., 14  
 Priestley, Joseph, 14, 24  
  
 QUELCH, HARRY, 165, 167, 214, 217, 221, 229, 243-4  
  
 RADICALISM, 16-17, 23, 33, 42, 50, 58-9, 63, 80, 141, 148, 155-6  
 Railway Clerks' Association, 252  
 Railways, 14, 100-1  
 Ramsay, Tommy, 107  
*Red Republican*, 117  
 Reform Act (1832), 16, 47-8, 50, 59-66  
 Reform Act (1867), 118-21, 157, 176  
 Reform Act (1884), 157  
 Rent Restriction Act (1915), 263-4  
*Republican*, 42  
 Rhodes, Cecil, 141  
 Richards, John, 86  
*Rights of Man*, 22, 25  
 Rochdale, 269  
 Rochdale Pioneers, 109  
 Rosebery, Lord, 207  
 Rossendale, 27  
 Rothstein, Theodore, 222, 242, 258, 267, 294  
*Rotten House of Commons*, 75  
 Rushton, Benjamin, 81  
 Ruskin College, 226, 237  
 Russian Revolution (1905), 221-3  
 Russian Revolution (1917), 270-4, 285  
  
 SAILORS' AND FIREMEN'S UNION, 194, 197, 206  
 St. George's Fields, 13  
 Saklatvala, Shapurji, 297  
 Salisbury Plain, 279  
 Sankey Commission, 281, 283  
 Scheu, Andreas, 166  
 Scottish Labour College, 260

- Scottish Labour Party, 183, 201  
 Scottish Land and Labour League, 166, 168, 183  
 Scotland, 25, 35, 160, 173, 194, 209, 260  
 Sexton, James, 217, 251  
 Shackleton, David, 217  
 Shaftesbury, Earl of, 95  
 Shaw, G. B., 173, 199, 214, 239  
 Shearmen, 37  
 Sheffield, 10, 15-16, 19, 23-4, 47, 60, 62, 87, 112, 114, 122-3, 265-6, 269, 288  
 Shelley, P. B., 38, 42  
 Shinwell, Emmanuel, 272, 280  
 Shipton, George, 108  
 Shop Stewards, 261, 265, 267, 269-70, 275, 280, 284  
 "Six Acts" (1819), 44-5  
 Skirving, William, 26  
 Smith, J. E., 68  
 Snowden, Philip, 227-8, 233, 251, 272  
*Social-Democrat*, 237  
 Social-Democratic Federation, 155, 163, 165-74, 179-83, 196, 198-203, 205, 213-16, 218, 225, 228-30, 251  
 Social-Democratic Party, 226, 228, 230, 235-7, 240, 242  
 Socialism, 51-8, 79, 155, 164, 167  
*Socialism its Growth and Outcome*, 169-70  
 Socialist Labour Party, 218, 225, 260-1, 272, 294-6  
 Socialist League, 168-74, 180-1, 197-8, 201, 203  
 Socialist Party of Great Britain, 218  
 Society of Ironfounders, 147  
 Society of the Bill of Rights, 13  
 Society for Promoting Constitutional Information, 14  
 Southampton, 245, 263  
 South Wales, 85, 87, 186, 201, 211, 237-9, 247, 262, 276, 293, 297  
 South Wales Miners' Federation, 237  
 South Wales Socialist Society, 293-4  
 Southwark, 19  
 Spa Fields, 42  
 Speenhamland system, 28, 72  
 Spence, Thomas, 42, 53  
 Spinning, 31, 48, 67, 76-7, 146  
 Spithead mutiny, 31  
 Staffordshire, 67, 92  
 Steadman, W. C., 213  
 Steam Engine Makers, 48  
 Steam Engine Makers' Society, 105  
*s.s. Jolly George*, 287  
*s.s. Olympic*, 245  
 Steel, 100  
 Stephens, J. R., 73-4, 88  
 Stephenson, J. J., 229  
 Stewart, Bob, 297  
 Stockholm Conference, 273  
 Stockport, 35, 43  
 Straker, William, 287  
 Stratford Radical Club, 160  
 Sturge, Joseph, 94  
 Stuttgart International Socialist Conference, 235, 242, 255, 271  
 Suffolk, 73  
 Swing, Captain, 51  
 Syndicalism, 234-5, 252  
 TAFF VALE DECISION, 211, 224, 231  
*Take Your Choice*, 13  
 Taylor, Albert, 271  
 Taylor, Dr. John, 81, 85  
 Ten Hour Act (1847), 95, 99, 101, 188  
 Textiles, 40, 135, 138  
 Thelwall, John, 27-8  
 Thomas, J. H., 251, 282  
 Thompson, William, 51, 54, 57-8  
 Thorne, Will, 167, 189-90, 198, 202, 213, 233, 256, 273  
 Tillet, Ben, 191, 198, 245-6  
*Times*, 42, 44  
*Today*, 166  
 Tolpuddle, 70-1  
 Tone, Wolfe, 30  
 Tonypany, 247  
 Tooke, Horne, 14, 27-8  
 Toomey, Jim, 191  
 Tories, 49, 61, 64-5, 119, 140, 253  
 Tower Hill, 191, 246  
 Trade Boards Act (1909), 224  
 Trade Union Act (1913), 231  
 Trades Union Congress, 123-5, 127, 175, 182, 185, 196-7, 202, 208, 211-13, 215, 256, 278, 283, 285, 288, 290-1  
 Trafalgar Square, 119, 174-6, 207, 256  
 Tranent, 30  
 Transport and General Workers' Union, 284-5  
 Transport Workers' Federation, 253  
 Triple Alliance, 281-3  
 "Two Acts" (1795), 29  
 Tyneside, 26  
 UNION OF DEMOCRATIC CONTROL, 266  
 United Englishmen, 30-1  
 United Flint Glass Makers' Society, 105  
 United Irishmen, 25-6, 30-1  
 United Scotsmen, 30-1  
 United States, Civil War in, 114-15, 118-19  
 VINCENT, HENRY, 85, 88, 94  
*Voice of the People*, 67  
 WALLAS, GRAHAM, 173  
 War Emergency Workers' National Committee, 256  
 Warren, Sir Charles, 175  
 Warwickshire, 127  
 Watson, William, 75

- Watt, Robert, 26-7  
 Weaving, 11, 18, 31, 35, 72, 81-2, 92, 103  
 Webb, Beatrice, 172, 181, 204, 221, 239, 291-2  
 Webb, Sidney, 172-3, 181, 204, 239, 291-2  
 Welcome and Protest Committee, 116  
 Wells, H. G., 239  
 West Ham, 190, 198, 202  
 Whigs, 9, 11, 50, 59, 61, 63, 65-6, 119, 130  
 White, George, 81  
 Wilberforce, William, 33  
 Wilkes, John, 12-14  
 Williams, J. E., 166, 174  
 Williams, Zephaniah, 88  
 Wilson, Havelock, 198-9, 245, 251, 273  
 Wisbech, 73  
 Wollstonecroft, Mary, 52  
 Woods, Sam, 213  
 Wool, 10, 14, 31, 101  
 Woolcombers, 18-19  
 Wooler, T. J., 42  
 Woolwich, 219  
 Worker, 265  
 Workers' Educational Association, 225  
 Workers' Republic, 268  
 Workers' Socialist Federation, 293-6  
 Workers' Union, 248-9  
 Workmans Times, 198-9  
 YORKSHIRE, 11, 37, 67, 82, 84, 86, 97, 112, 114, 118, 125, 186, 193-4, 199, 202, 207  
 Yorkshire Factory Times, 198  
 ZIMMERWALD CONFERENCE, 258, 267

Since the first publication of this book a vast number of books on various aspects of the history of the Labour Movement have appeared. It is possible only to give a small selection which may be helpful.

- Industry and Empire. E. J. Hobsbawm. 1970.  
 The Rise of the Working Class. J. Kuczynski. 1972.  
 Petticoat Rebellion. Marion Ramelson. 1967.  
 Banner Bright. J. Gorman. 1973.  
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 Class and Conflict in Nineteenth-Century England, 1815-1850.  
 Ed. Patricia Hollis. 1973.  
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 The Making of the English Working Class. E. P. Thompson.  
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 Captain Swing. E. J. Hobsbawm and G. Rudé. 1968.  
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 The Life and Ideas of Robert Owen. A. L. Morton. 1962.  
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 Before the Socialists. R. Harrison. 1965.  
 Eleanor Marx: Family Life, 1855-1885. Yvonne Kapp. 1973.  
 Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement. H. Collins and  
 C. Abramsky. 1965.  
 Labouring Men. E. J. Hobsbawm. 1964.  
 Tom Mann and His Times. Dona Torr. 1956.  
 Political Writings of William Morris. Ed. A. L. Morton. 1973.  
 Strikes: A Live History 1887-1971. R. Leeson. 1973.  
 The Shop Stewards' Movement and Workers' Control 1910-22.  
 B. Pribicevic. 1959.  
 The Impact of the Russian Revolution in Britain. R. Page  
 Arnot. 1967.  
 History of the C.P.G.B., Vol I. J. Klugmann. 1968.

This book meets a long-felt need for a short, popular but comprehensive history of the British Labour Movement.

The history of British Labour is the history of the rise of the common people, of the long fight for wages, hours and conditions of work, democratic rights and social welfare, and of the growth of mass organisation and the idea of Socialism. The authors have traced the various clearly marked phases of this struggle from its inception nearly two hundred years ago to the time when Labour had finally emerged as a great independent force, millions strong. They have sought to explain the economic and social causes of the changes described as the movement advanced by continually adapting itself to new conditions and new problems.

Today when British Labour has such opportunities as never existed before to unite its ranks and assume national leadership, the study of this history contains many lessons, not least among them that it is time to realise the fundamental belief of Chartism "that democracy means the rule of the working people".



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